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A WALK IN RURAL RUSSIA **Vladimir Soloukhin**

Vladimir Soloukhin is a distinguished writer who comes from the region of Vladimir, one of the oldest cities in Russia. Within a few miles of it but over impossible roads is Suzdal, the first medieval Russian capital which later became a place of pilgrimage and of which nothing is left today but a cathedral and the ruins of some forty churches and monasteries. Although Vladimir is only a couple of hours by train from Moscow, the country round it is curiously primitive and untouched. There are wolves in the woods and often no roads, but an occasional bicycle track and small and half deserted villages at a vast distance from one another.

One summer, Soloukhin, whose writer friends were off for their holidays to such places as Vietnam, took the almost unheard of step of going with his wife on a walking tour in his native region. This book is a day-to-day traveller's diary describing the countryside with its specific central-Russia charm, against its background of traditions, customs and legends of the Russian peasantry, older and stronger than any of the results of political change.

Illustrations and jacket design
by Judith Ward.

A WALK IN RURAL RUSSIA

by
VLADIMIR SOLOUKHIN

Translated from the Russian by Stella Miskin

E. P. DUTTON & CO.
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Foreword by the Publishers

Vladimir Soloukhin is a poet and prose writer who comes from the region of Vladimir, one of the oldest cities in Russia. Within a few miles of it but over impossible roads is Suzdal, the first mediaeval Russian capital which later became a place of pilgrimage and of which nothing is left today but a cathedral and the remains of some forty churches and monasteries. Although Vladimir is only a couple of hours by train from Moscow, the country around it is curiously primitive and untouched. In the summer of 1956 Soloukhin, whose writer friends were off for their holidays to such places as Vietnam, took the unusual step of going on a walking tour in his native region.

His wife insisted on accompanying him and the two of them hired seats in a car which took them from Moscow to the border of the Vladimir province (Oblast). Very soon they found they had to go through almost literally untrodden country to reach the nearest small town. The woods had wolves in them and often no roads, but an occasional bicycle track and, at a vast distance from one another, small and half-deserted villages.

Soloukhin is an exceptionally non-urban type among the Russian intellectuals for most of whom culture is equivalent to town life. As a result, although he has little interest in the problems of the liberal young intellectuals, he is thoroughly aware of the troubles of the peasantry and he describes them with sympathy and frankness. The book is not, however, in the least a thesis. It is a description of the countryside with its specific central-Russian charm and incidentally—through the eyes of peasants he meets by chance—of the unbelievably remote atmosphere of village life.

Even the minute towns in the district, with their small markets and tiny local industries, have been acting as a magnet for the people from the surrounding villages who, whenever they could, fled from the insecurity of kolkhoz life. Yet in the

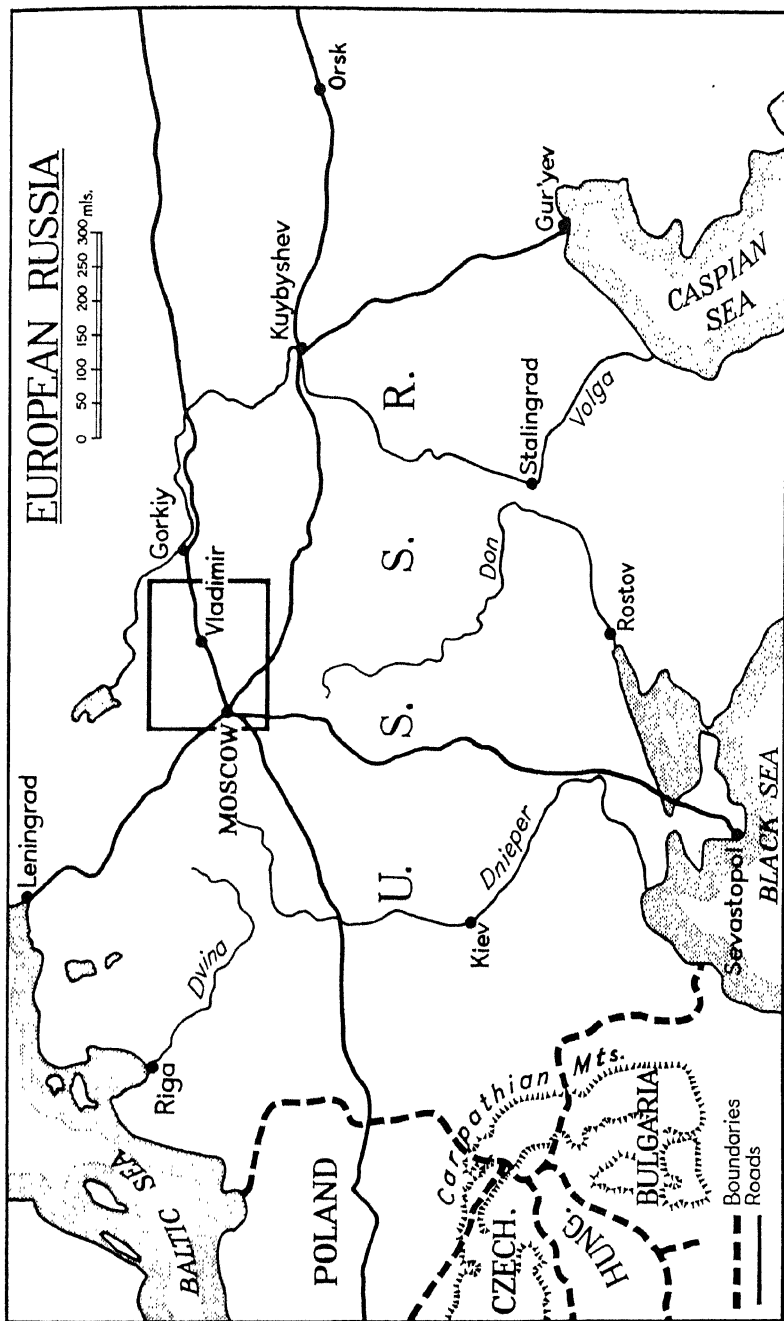
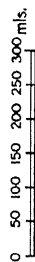
background there are the traditions, customs and legends of the Russian peasantry, older and stronger than any of the results of political change. The book is virtually a day-to-day travel diary, full of conversations, characters, eccentrics, stories and places. It will appeal to anyone who is fond of the country and interested in colourful traditions and ways of life.

Translator's Note

Throughout the book the value of the rouble is that which it had before the currency reform, i.e. very much less than its present value.

A kolkhoz is not simply a single farm worked on co-operative lines, but, particularly after the move to enlarge them, is often a large area comprising several villages. The administrative offices will be in one of the villages. The director of the kolkhoz is called the chairman; the head of a team of kolkhoz workers or kolkhozniks is called the brigade leader or brigadier.

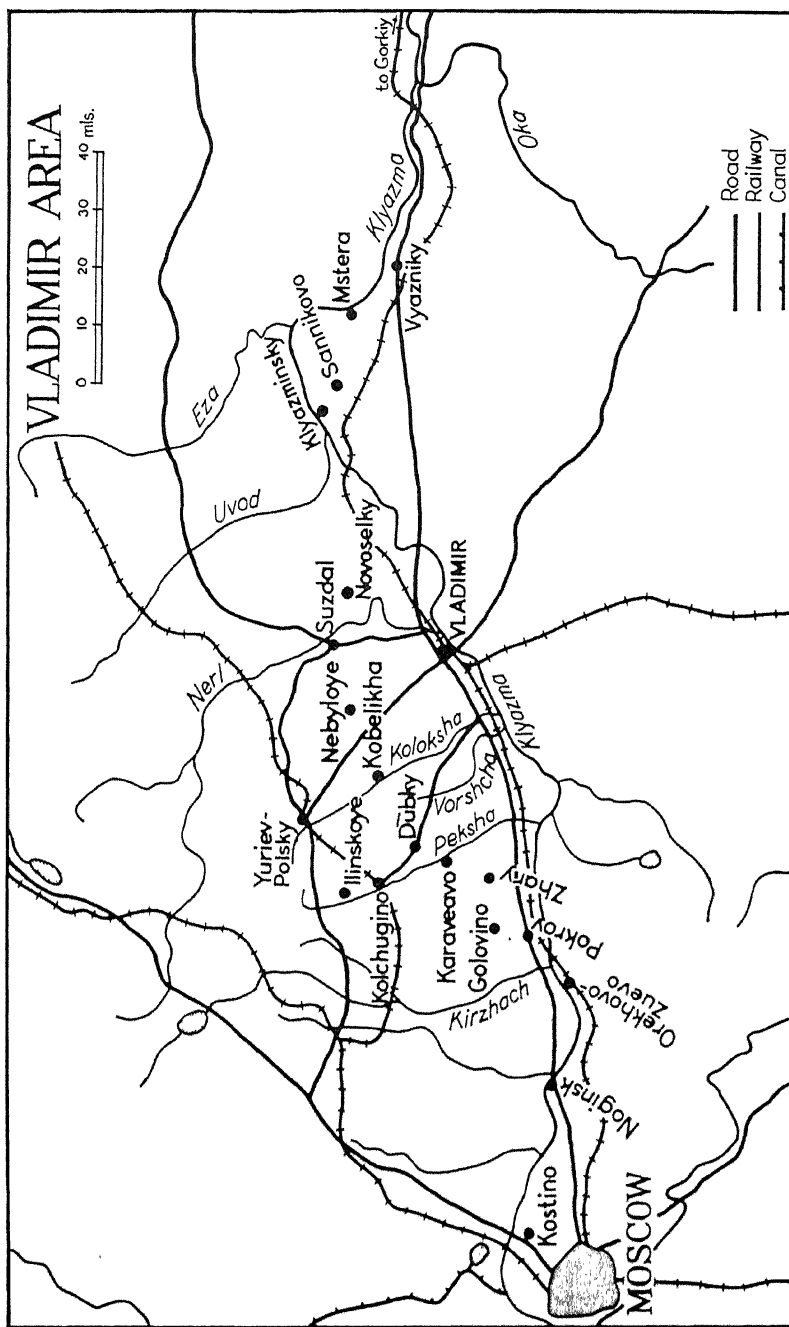
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A Walk in Rural Russia

On returning from a journey the traveller will inevitably boast and tell of the marvels he has seen. Meanwhile it affords him much satisfaction to watch the astonished faces of his audience, which show that they only half believe everything that he says. Travel would lose half its meaning if one could not tell about it afterwards.

So one day I had been bragging to a friend, when suddenly I put a question to him.

‘Well, what news have you? Where have you been during all this time?’

‘Me? Oh, I have been on a very humdrum little journey, to your part of the world incidentally—the country round Vladimir. But what country it is! You remember, as you leave Kameshky, a copse on the right . . .’

He began to talk about this copse as though I had only just returned from those parts. My ears turned red and I was ashamed to interrupt him and say: ‘I have never been to Kameshky, I have not seen that copse of yours, and it is the first time in my life that I have heard the name of Peresekino.’

Another friend put me to even greater shame.

‘We came to Yuriev-Polsky in the early morning. It had only recently stopped raining, the earth was steaming and the grass sparkled. It is a quiet little town of wooden houses. Smoke was rising from the chimneys. A river flows through the town, and it was so full that it seemed as though it must splash over its banks. This little river right in the centre of the town was all covered with water-lilies. They were yellow and blazed on the quiet morning water. Here and there little wooden platforms jutted out over the water, and on these some lusty peasant women were standing and beating their linen with flails, their skirts rolled up above their white calves. All around the cocks were shouting. A Flemish scene, exactly! That is your Yuriev-Polsky. And then the river, what is its name—Kolochka?’

‘Yes, Kolochka.’

‘No, no, Koloksha! That river, the Koloksha, is absolutely full of fish, so we were told.’

Now I was not merely blushing, I was ready to sink through the floor. ‘The Kolochka indeed! All right, you may not have been to Kameshky, but not to know that Yuriev-Polsky stands on the Koloksha, which flows only a few miles from your own front door. Yes, and Yuriev-Polsky itself is hardly twenty miles away. Yet you have never been there, you know nothing about it. You have travelled to the Far North, to the Balkans, beside the Adriatic, but you have quite neglected your own homeland. Other people tell you about its charms.’

So an irresistible desire came upon me to see the whole of the Vladimir countryside as closely and minutely as I could; indeed I was aware of almost a moral obligation towards it, for it is as beautiful as any in the world (I had always been firmly convinced of that, because it is my native land).

I remember that once we were strolling through some botanical gardens in the Caucasus. The trees bore labels with wonderful names inscribed on them: yucca, eucalyptus, laurocerasus. After a time we grew tired of marvelling at the spread of the branches, the thickness of the trunks and the quaintness of the foliage.

Suddenly we saw a quite unusual tree, like no other in the whole garden. It was white as snow, a tender green like young grass, and it stood out sharply against the somewhat uniform colouring of the background. We saw it then with new eyes and valued it in a new way. The label told us that there stood before us a common birch.

Just try lying under a birch-tree on soft, cool grass, when only fragments of sunlight and the clear blue of the midday sky are glimpsed through the leaves. How the birch will whisper to you, bending softly to your ear, what tender words and wonderful stories it will murmur, and what a feeling of contentment it will bring!

Then think of a palm-tree. One cannot even lie beneath it, for either there is no grass at all, or it is dry, dusty and prickly. The leaves of the palm rattle in the wind as though they were tin or ply-wood, and there is no caress nor feeling in the sound.

It may well be that all the beauty of lands beyond the sea

yields to the quiet charm of the Central Russian countryside, painted by Levitan, Shishkin and Polenov.

In short I made a firm decision: I would devote the coming summer entirely to the Vladimir countryside. But what did I mean by the word 'devote'? Should I travel through it? And if so — how?

In the course of my life I have been carried by many forms of transport: goods train, passenger train, narrow-gauge railway at five kilometres an hour, a railway engine without coaches (the engine moved back to front), cable railway (the car stuck fast at the highest point), deer-sleigh over the tundra in summer, dog-sleigh over the tundra in winter, a camel, a Kirghizian horse, a Kabardinian horse, cart, aeroplane, helicopter, cars of the most varied makes and sizes, fishing boat, ocean liner, river tug, rafts, an ice-breaker, air-sleighs, an ice-floe, an elk in harness . . .

I must say that, if one considers the matter seriously, of all these forms of transport a river steamer seems to be the most tranquil and convenient. But this was quite inappropriate on this occasion.

'Why not go on foot?' — the thought suddenly dawned on me. Get down from a car in the depths of the country and follow the first track. Doubtless the track would lead to a village, no matter which, thence to a second and a third. When night falls, spend the night wherever you chance to be. Knock at the first cottage and ask to spend the night. The next morning go on farther. For even if you walk no more than ten kilometres a day, which would be not at all taxing, no more than a stroll, you would cover quite a distance in a month and a half!

For a whole week I went about in a drunken condition, intoxicated with my dream. If I shut my eyes I saw a steep hill, covered with white yarrow flowers, a path led up it and turned left behind a clump of pines. Beside the path was a field of young rye. Then there was a rushing stream which must be crossed by a plank bridge made from a pine log. A woman by a well gave me some ice-cold water, which flowed sweetly down my throat . . .

The only trouble was that the dream came to me in December, and the earliest time I could go on such an excursion was June.



From that time my favourite occupation was sitting over a map. At first this was a big map of the Soviet Union, on which the Vladimir district took up only as much space as could be covered by a small coin. However much I pored over this map, it told me little. It is true I could learn from it that the Vladimir countryside lies between Moscow and Gorky, if one travels from west to east. I recalled some words I had read: 'The Vladimir land is situated between the rivers Oka and Volga, where the Moscow state developed from the Vladimir-Suzdal principedom, and later from the Moscow principedom, and subsequently grew into the great Russian empire, which in its extent surpassed all the states of the world.'

Here then was the very root of Russia.

I soon managed to obtain a detailed map of the area, on which the scale was a centimetre to only five kilometres. On this map there was a great deal of green colour denoting forest, and a considerable amount of shaded area indicating marshland. The spaces left white marked the regions of open country and meadows.

In the middle of an expanse of green one would see a tiny dot, thirty or so kilometres from a dirt road, and one's imagination would paint a picture of a dozen or so dark log huts and the brown trunks of the silent pines crowding closely round them. Or one would see such another tiny dot in the very middle of a marsh, and one would think: 'What on earth made anyone settle there? It would be frightening there on a moonlit night, though the sunsets must be beautiful!'

Sunsets are all very well, but there is not much grain to be grown in forest or in swamp. The people of the Vladimir countryside understood long ago that they could not live off the land alone, and they left their villages to practise auxiliary trades. Hence there came into being all those painters of icons, furriers, saddlers, embroiderers, makers of bast sandals, toys and baskets, carpenters, wheelwrights, smiths and stonemasons.

Before the spring temptations began for me. One of my fellow-workers left for Vietnam, another set off for Syria or the Lebanon, and a third to Africa. My turn too might come, and I began to have doubts. Supposing I suddenly received a proposal to travel abroad, should I refuse outright and say: 'No, dear friends, I should of course like to go to Singapore, but unfortunately I have to go to Petushky or Vospushky.'

And in fact such a proposal was made to me. Not to Singapore certainly, not so far away as that, but to a country which I had dreamed of visiting since childhood.

The friends whom I consulted gave differing advice. The first, a person of sober views, said: 'The Vladimir byways will not vanish away; you can go there next summer.' The second, who still kept the bearing of an officer, exclaimed without any hesitation: 'If you have made up your mind, don't change it. You must never alter a decision once it has been taken.' The third, a philosopher, observed profoundly: 'Bear in mind that from travel in foreign countries you will learn something, but from travel in your own country you will get to know yourself.' The fourth, a poet and a dreamer, expressed himself figuratively: 'Which is better: to drive for a whole month through a crowd of beautiful women, or to spend the same time with only one woman, but the one you love?' Finally there was the friend who found the solution in a second: 'What is bothering you? Ask to have your trip postponed to the autumn. Then you will have the best of both worlds.'

It is a wonderful thing to have a number of friends.

The old tourist guidebooks strongly recommended travel through the Vladimir countryside. They gave a detailed description of the road from Vladimir to Suzdal, or the so-called Stromynka, the road from Moscow to Yuriyev-Polsky, and from there to Suzdal and Vladimir. The reason is that in this region there are various monasteries and ancient churches, very rare iconostases, the work of Rublev or Ushakov, and also places connected with the rulers of Russia. It was here that Ivan the Terrible prayed, here he incarcerated his wife; here lived the wife of Peter the Great when she fell from favour; it was in this village that Dmitry Pozharsky was staying when the men of Nizhny-Novgorod came and bowed down before him, begging him to come and save Russia. And here Alexander Nevsky himself was buried.

So the old guidebooks strongly recommended a journey through the Vladimir country, and it is quite wrong that in the new handbooks of tourist routes, where there is sure to be mention of the Georgian Military Highway, the village of Arkhangelskoye and Lake Issyk, there is no reference to Yuriyev-Polsky, nor Suzdal, nor Murom, nor Mstera, nor even Vladimir

itself. Accordingly, when I glanced into such a guide, I closed it again immediately.

‘Have you bought your thermos-flask, tent and all the rest?’ I was asked by experienced tourists.

‘No, and I don’t intend to.’

‘How can you go on such an expedition without a tent? The whole charm of it is to boil tea over a camp fire, and cook fish-soup, and for this you must have your fishing-rods.’

No, it is more comfortable to spend the nights in the homes of peasants and to eat with them too. So I should need none of such things. I should not take a crust of bread nor a lump of sugar to hold in reserve. It is difficult to understand why one should hurry away from people to spend the night, when it is convenient to stay with them, chat and find out how they live and what they think.

So all was ready. There was only one possible hindrance, which was subject to no control and which most frequently acts contrary to human desires—the weather. It is well known that many anecdotes are told about weather forecasts and that there is not much trust in them. Nevertheless tens of millions of people listen every day with close attention and interest to the news of the weather. But when we want anything very much, we are more inclined to pluck the petals from a simple daisy and believe what that foretells than trust the predictions of a scientific institution.

The most precise forecast, which I obtained officially from the editor of a serious magazine, proclaimed: ‘Until June 27th—rain and cold, after June 27th—cold but dry . . .’

The First Day

Here begins a true and systematic account of all that befell the author of these notes and his fellow-travellers during their wanderings through the Vladimir countryside. Their journey began on June 7th, 1956, at midday, from the wooden bridge over the river Kirzhach, which here marks the boundary between the Moscow and Vladimir districts. This is how it happened.

A car bearing the notice 'Moscow—Vladimir' finally emerged from the stony labyrinth of the capital and sped at a faster rate along a straight and wide motor-highway. In places this was a finished motorway with a concrete surface and one-way traffic, and even with a strip of grass down the centre. But from time to time the car's route was blocked by piles of sand and earth heaped up by bulldozers. We were told that not only was the old Gorky road being improved, but that a great highway from Moscow to Peking was being constructed.

Sometimes the car sped on at a hundred kilometres an hour, at other times it lurched from one side of the road to the other, jolting over sandy ruts at no more than a walking pace.

The heat was terrific; even the wind which came buffeting in through the car's open windows did not bring any coolness. There were three passengers. There might have been only two, had not my wife that morning insisted on driving out to see me off on this 'dreadful' journey.

One never knows how things will turn out, so at this point I will introduce my wife to you. Her name is Rosa and she has dark hair and a dark complexion. However, was not that illustrious Frenchman correct when he said that a wife has no appearance? In any case it is not the husband's business to describe it.

The third passenger was a major with a smoothly shaven head, a square reddish beard and a pince-nez with rectangular frames. He was the only one of the three who had the sober intention of going right to the destination for which our tickets were bought.

All at once I had a slight but perceptible uneasiness in my chest. There was good cause for excitement. I had been awaiting this day with impatience all through the winter, and the mere fact that it had arrived was sufficiently exciting. But that was a trifle compared with the main cause of my agitation, which I tried to conceal even from myself. I was going to be very lonely. In a few minutes I should get out of the car, step away from the road into the tall June grass, and then for many days I should be straying alone through the wide green countryside. There was something a little alarming in the thought. There is always something frightening in face of the unknown. I did not know where I should have dinner that day, nor where I should spend the night. I should come to unknown villages, where no one would be expecting me, and altogether was it not an ill-considered enterprise? After all there were regular tourist routes with properly organised halting-places, along which numerous groups proceeded, all completely and suitably equipped. But it was too late to reflect on all this.

‘Stop the car, please.’

The car lurched to the side of the road and stopped as though it had come up against an invisible wall. The driver turned round with concern.

‘Is someone feeling ill?’

‘No, we want to get off here. Thank you for bringing us.’

‘But your ticket is for Vladimir. That is almost a hundred kilometres from here.’

‘So much the better. We’ll stop here. We’ve taken a fancy to this place.’

‘You’re free to do as you please,’ the driver muttered, and the car disappeared.

My rucksack seemed a great deal heavier than when I had tried it on in Moscow.

‘Let’s go. You can escort me to the other side of the river and thumb a car back.’

The wooden bridge stood on timber piers, round which shallow brown water flowed noiselessly. Ridges of sand as white as sugar became pure gold when they sank below the water; then they reappeared as little islands and recovered their dazzling whiteness. One bank of the river was sloping and was edged for some yards with young osiers, which were so bushy

and so vividly green that even the sand beneath had a greenish tinge. The other bank was steep but not high, and here it seemed that there was something continuously plopping and sliding into the water. Graceful young pines crowded to the very edge and looked down into the river. But the stream flowed swiftly with a rippled surface and washed out the outlines of the trees.

After crossing over the bridge we were in the Vladimir district. We said goodbye. I ran down to the left from the embankment and set off upstream beside the river. There was nothing very remarkable to look at. A legless cripple had left his clothing and crutches on the grass and was crawling over the sand to the water to bathe. A woman with her skirt tucked up above her knees had waded into the water and was rinsing her linen. At a little distance stood a car, and the family which had driven here were settling down, stretching a dazzling white sheet as a tent.

The path which I had chosen curved round a large sandpit, furrowed with the tracks of cars and tractors, and came out into a wide, flat meadow with trees here and there, singly or in groups. At this moment I heard the quick breathing of someone running behind me. I turned—it was Rosa.

‘Have I forgotten something?’

‘No, nothing. I’m coming with you.’

‘Where?’

‘Wherever you are going. And don’t argue about it. That is why I let you set off alone. And don’t look at my shoes. We can either knock the heels off them straightaway, or else when we get to a shop we can buy some canvas ones.’

‘What shop?’

‘The village shop. Do you imagine that I know less than you do about life in the country? Every village has a store, and we’ll buy them there. So give me half the things to carry and let’s get on.’

‘Half!’

‘All right, at least give me the camera.’

That is how I was deprived of my solitude before I had time to savour it.

The river beside which we set off now and again curved sharply to right or left, its glittering surface coming up against thickets of

osier or sandy ridges. At last we grew tired of this and decided to take the first path that led away from the river. Quite soon we came to a track which curved to the right up a fairly steep slope, overgrown with oak-trees. We followed this track and in half an hour we were surrounded by a forest of ancient pines. It was hushed and silent in this forest. High up above, where the bright green of the tree-tops stood out against the whiteness of the clouds, perhaps there wandered a breeze, but down below it was quite still. There was a strong smell of honey in the hot air, and for some time we could not decide where this sweet honey smell was coming from.

Everybody knows the beautiful and enticing sight of clusters of cranberries in autumn among the shiny dark-green leaves, looking like drops of fresh blood, but few people have noticed the flowers of this evergreen shrub. It did not occur to us that this insignificant little flower could make all the air of the immense forest drugged with its scent. I said 'insignificant little flower' and thereby did injury to one of the most elegant and beautiful of flowers. One only has to take the trouble to break off a few branches or, still better, kneel down and scrutinise them closely.

That which at a distance looked all alike will amaze you with its diversity. Little white bells, just tinged with pink, gather into a drooping tassel at the end of a dark-green branch. Each little bell is no bigger than the head of a match, but what a scent it has! These are the cranberry flowers.

Then there is another little bell, but a very strange one. It is quite round and like a ripe berry which has already turned red on one side. It is also like a tiny china lampshade, but so delicate and fragile that it could scarcely be made by human hands. Here there will be a sweet morsel both for children and for black grouse, for in the place of each little lampshade there will ripen a juicy bilberry with a blue sheen on its black skin.

There were other clusters of tiny white pitchers with bright red necks. These little pitchers hang neck downwards and scent pours from them the whole day long. This is the medicinal herb—bearberry. No, it is only from a distance that the flowers of the forest look alike. If you look closely, you will see that the cranberry bells in the delicacy of their workmanship, in their elegance and fragility are in no way inferior to any other,

larger flower. Among jewellers it is small work which has the greater value.

Little white pyramids, bright against the drab grey of the earth and the close green turf, the work of moles, revealed the secret of the forest—that it stood on clean river sand.

Now and again we came to big clearings where all the trees had been cut down. Little pines stood there, lit up by the sun. It seemed as though the old trees had let their children out to play and frolic, and that when the evening came they would call them back again beneath their dark and gloomy shade.

One thing puzzled us. Along each side of the track ran paths which seemed unusually well tended and swept, and indeed looked as if they had been sprinkled with sand. We pondered on this, but for the present found no solution.

The pines too were in flower. If we struck with a stick against a branch, we were at once enveloped in a dense yellow cloud. The golden dust settled slowly in the still air.

Only yesterday, indeed only this morning, we had been living within four walls not more than five metres apart, and now we were suddenly intoxicated by all this—the forest flowers, the sun, the smell of resin and pine, the rich possessions which had suddenly been granted us. I was held back by the rucksack, but Rosa would run forward and cry out that she had found lilies-of-the-valley, or disappear deep into the forest and return alarmed by a ‘huge bird’, which had fluttered out from under her very feet.

Meanwhile we saw water glittering through the trees ahead, and soon the path led us to a big lake. This lake was, so to speak, without banks. The moist, thick grass of a forest clearing went on and on and suddenly there was water on the same level as the grass, just like a puddle filled with rain. One felt that the grass still continued beneath the water, and that it had been submerged recently and not for long. But a firm, sandy bottom showed through the yellowish water, which grew blacker and blacker as it became deeper.

Long, narrow jetties has been constructed here, and close by a flat-bottomed boat floated idly, tied to a tree. It was reflected clearly in the brown mirror of the lake, as though drawn with Indian ink. In a clearing thirty paces from the lake stood a large timber house with verandahs. On the opposite



shore were white, stone buildings, whence came the sound of voices, snatches of song and the laughter of girls.

A man had approached us noiselessly and stood behind us. We looked round when he coughed, not knowing how long he had been standing there in silence. He looked about sixty years of age, clean-shaven, lean and wrinkled, with a shock of curly, unkempt hair. His huge rubber boots were first to catch our eye.

‘Is this your mansion?’ I nodded towards the house with the verandah.

‘No, young man, I’m the forester here, and such mansions are not for us. There was an overseer, who worked in that colony over there,’ the old man pointed to the other side of the lake. ‘He worked there forty years, and he was allowed to build his house here. A site for a palace you may say truly. But he’s dead now.’

‘Have you been forester long?’

‘A long while, forty years. I was a woodcutter here, when it was all the property of one man, Ivan Nikolaevich Shelekhov. He was a wealthy man.’

‘Where did he live, in that stone building over there, the other side of the lake?’

'No, young man, that was the Vvedensky monastery, and the lake too is called Vvedensky after it. It is a good lake with plenty of fish. You see the stake there in the water. If you go there at dawn with a line and tie your boat to the stake, before an hour is out you'll have a pail full of perch. The water is remarkable too. Towards evening it seems like boiled water. My rubber boots make my joints ache, so in the evening I paddle for two or three hours, and my legs are young again. Other people don't know that there is such a cure. Sometimes, so as not to waste the time, I take a net with me. So I get help for my feet and two baskets of bream besides. The bream are getting fewer now, the peaty water kills them. Of course there is not much depth, six metres at the most. Now the White lake close by, that's a different matter. Thirty-five metres deep. It's a hole, the White lake, a huge hole. But the water is cold. All the fish have disappeared because of the cold water. They say there's an underground connection between that lake and the river . . . or perhaps the sea . . .'

He looked inquiringly at us to see how we should react to this mention of the sea. Perhaps he wanted to try out on some fresh people the probability of this unlikely hypothesis, which had caught his fancy. 'Now why don't you paddle in the water, to take the ache from your feet?'

Although it was diverting to imagine the old man paddling for two hours in the evening in the silent lake, we had to bring him back to the point from which he had strayed.

'If your Shelekhov did not live in that stone house, where did he live—in Vladimir?'

'Vladimir! Shelekhov wouldn't live in Vladimir! Warsaw, that's where he lived. Only you couldn't call it living, he just lay there paralysed. But even when he had his health, he never came to his forest here.'

'You mean that he owned such wealth, such beauty, and made no use of it?'

'No use? Money flowed to him from it. As for its beauty, only we foresters are able to value that properly, as all our life is lived in it. A cat can grow accustomed to a dog, if it is trained to it long enough when it is young, and a man gets accustomed to the forest, as to his wife or some other living thing. A pine-tree is like something alive, you can talk to it.'

We were just going to leave the lake when I remembered the mysterious paths beside the track and returned to the old man. He looked at me kindly.

‘That’s because of fire, young man. You walk through the forest, throw down a match or cigarette-end, and a fire starts. But this little path will not let the fire into the forest. We take good care of the forest, young man, very good care!’

The fateful question now confronted us: where were we to go now, as we looked at the setting sun? At the beginning of our walk, when we had diverged from the river, we had glimpsed a little village to one side. We should have to make way back to it. We were no longer beguiled by the beauties of the forest. The rapidly deepening twilight drove us on, and by the time we reached the village it was quite dark. A light shone out from one of the cottages. Plucking up our courage we went towards the light.

Here ended the first day of our wanderings.

The Second Day

It is a fine and cheerful thing to walk through the country in the early morning. The air is still cool and pleasantly refreshes the throat and chest. The sun has not come into its strength and has a mild, caressing warmth. Beneath the slanting rays of the morning light everything stands out in higher relief, more prominent and vivid—both the little bridge across the ditch and the trees, which are still wrapped in shadow at the base while their tops are glowing pink and bright. Even the small bumps on the path cast their small shadows, which they will not do at midday.

Here and there in the forest there are black and gleaming patches of bog. The grass growing near them is even greener. Sometimes a stream flows out from the depths of the forest, crosses the path and hurriedly vanishes again into the forest. In one spot out from the forest darkness there flowed right up to our feet a moist, luxuriant, intolerably brilliant stream of moss, like some gigantic boa-constrictor. In the centre of its almost unnatural green there was a trickle of coffee-coloured water.

The brown water of such streams is not at all turbid; if you pour some into a glass, it looks translucent with a glint of gold. Evidently there is an extremely fine admixture of peat, which gives it this beautiful colour. We scooped up the water in our hands from a stream flowing along a soft and luxuriant green bed, and it had the appearance of being completely pure.

Shadows of pines, spread out like a fan, lay across the path. This was a young forest without undergrowth—ship timber of the future. At the side of the road we suddenly came upon a wide, smooth bench, made of planks. It was all scored with signatures, the names of people who wished to perpetuate themselves in such a fashion.

We rested on the bench, watching a tree-creeper running up and down the trunk of a pine with the speed and agility of a little mouse.

Soon the white-painted gates of a rest-house, 'Pine Forest',

provided the explanation of the bench in the forest, and the origin of the names scored upon it. We had no concern with a rest-house, and we turned along the path which skirted it.

After a couple of kilometres we noticed a line of bushes such as only grow along the banks of a small stream. A well-grown, red-faced lad came out from the bushes into the forest-clearing. He was barefoot, with trousers rolled up above his knees and a white shirt hanging loose outside the trousers. In one hand he held a fishing-rod, in the other a number of small fish strung together. As he pushed his way through the bushes he had sprinkled himself with dew, which now sparkled on his hair. There was brightness in the lad's face too, showing his satisfaction with his catch and with the presence of people to see it. Or perhaps he was simply happy to be by the stream in the early morning.

'What is the name of this tributary?' we inquired.

'It is our Sheridar,' the lad answered. 'Don't think too lightly of it; if you try to leap over, you may get your feet wet.'

'What fish are there in your Sheridar?'

'All sorts! Pike, perch, roach, gudgeon, chub.'

'No burbot?'

'Burbot, of course. They went clean out of my head.'

'Dace too, perhaps?'

'Yes, dace.' The Sheridar patriot was glad to be reminded. 'There is one on my string here. I've just caught him. There are plenty of dace.'

'Well, good fishing! Don't waste time on us; this is just the time for fish to be biting.'

'No, I must be off, even now my wife will be angry. I came here without telling her. I ought to have taken the piglet to market, and I came to the Sheridar instead. Never mind, she'll be glad enough of the fish soup.'

We sympathised with the lad, and had gone some way from him, when we suddenly heard him running after us and calling. We waited for him to catch us up.

'What a misfortune, I quite forgot . . .'

'What did you forget?'

'Ruff! I forgot to say ruff! There are ruff too in the Sheridar. Well, goodbye. It's a good thing that I caught up with you for I had quite forgotten to mention ruff!'

The forest suddenly came to an end, and the dewy brightness of meadows stretching away to the far blue sky dazzled our eyes. They were gold with dense patches of buttercups. Willows stood up from this yellow floor, which stretched almost unbroken far into the distance.

At length we crossed the Sheridar by a rickety bridge, made of three logs fastened together, and set off to the right, keeping close to the bank. The meadows, at first so flowery, gradually changed into a desolate expanse, covered with hillocks. Like all living things, a meadow has its youth, maturity and decline. Small-reed and mat-grass, those bitter enemies of flowery meadows, had grown luxuriantly here, covering the ground closely. Flowers cannot pierce their way through it.

The sun was beginning to blaze and our feet were burning from the walk, so we looked around for a place to bathe; but there were two metres of mud and slime between the bank and the water, and the water itself was not inviting. A white film like a spider's web lay on it here and there, twigs were floating on it and water-beetles darted busily over the surface. At length we came to a round pool, some ten to fifteen metres across. A sandy bank shelved down into the water, giving promise of some depth. Such pools in small streams can be very deep and icy-cold; as a rule there are springs in the slime at the bottom. Certainly the water here was icy, but what bliss it was to splash about with hot, bare feet.

It is always alarming to plunge into unfamiliar water, even if it is the Sheridar. At any rate it is more alarming than entering an unfamiliar forest or city.

Every river has its own spirit, mysterious and enigmatic. Until you sense and understand this, it will always be alarming. In this pool it seemed to me that there must surely be a crayfish lurking under a bush on the opposite bank. I swam across and thrust my hand into the hole. Sure enough there was a crayfish there. This crayfish made the Sheridar seem less enigmatic and more friendly, for it was lurking precisely where I felt it must be.

When we came out of the river, refreshed, we were met by a little gang of urchins. We asked them if the pool was deep.

'No, Uncle, it won't reach to your neck. To your chest at the most.'

If I had known that the water in the pool would not reach

up to my neck, I should not have had various fancies about river spirits. If there is a shallow bottom, there can be no spirit and no fairy-tale.

We caught a glimpse of a white church with a green roof among the trees on a hill, which we had next to climb. The boys told us that this was the village of Voskresenye.



The track to the village went between the church and a Pioneer camp. In the camp on the left behind a trim fence we saw various wooden slides, swings and horizontal bars, but there was no sign of the Pioneers themselves. Perhaps it was some of them we had met in the meadows.

The railings round the church were half destroyed; only the stone pillars remained, the iron had most likely gone to the village smithy for horse-shoes. Tall, untended grass rioted behind the fence. But the church itself and its roof had recently been painted and looked like new.

The first thing that struck us in the village of Voskresenye was the absence of orchards and kitchen-gardens. Certainly it

is well known that in wooded areas, where the peasants have had to wage a constant struggle with the forest, there are no trees nor orchards. For example, take the republic of Komi. You will rarely see a tree there close to any of the cottages. Why should there be, since the taiga is all around! This applies also in some degree to the more wooded areas of central Russia. But it is very strange that there should not even be kitchen-gardens in a Russian village. Every house in Voskresenye stood as in a meadow among tall grass and bright flowers, mostly buttercups and dandelions.

We sat down to rest in the shade of an ancient poplar under the windows of a cottage.

'Now we need a village ancient to talk to,' Rosa said dreamily.

Sure enough, here came an old man through the village. He kept one arm behind his back and held a stick in the other. His back was unnaturally straight, as though he had swallowed a poker. No part of the old man shared in his progress except his tottering legs. He looked as though, if he were to stumble and fall, he would lie flat out, straight and unbent.

'Do you belong to the village, Grandpa?'

'Yes,' the old man replied and tottered on, not decreasing his pace nor turning his head, as though he were a mechanical toy.

'Have you lived here long?'

'All my life.' He continued to potter on his way.

'Why don't you sit down with us and rest?'

The ancient stopped.

'I'll stand here for a bit, but I can't sit.'

'How old are you?'

'In years I'm not so old, seventy-six, but my legs have given out. I've been a cobbler all my life, fitting shoes to other people's feet, and now I've been left without feet myself.'

The old man readily told us about the village.

'This was a village of carpenters. All the men went off—to Moscow, Petersburg or somewhere. Only the women remained behind, and they didn't bother with orchards or gardens. They brought potatoes, onions, cucumbers and other vegetables from the market in Pokrov. To tell the truth, the people were spoiled, they had roubles sent them from outside, and didn't need to work the land. Well, after the Revolution, all the carpenters settled for good in Moscow. Each of them had some

attachment there; besides they were frightened by tales of the expropriation of the wealthy peasants. So half the village ceased to exist. Nowadays the young people go away to school. Very few people are left, very few! Now excuse me, I'll go on. My feet hurt me when I stand, they're easier when I move.'

The old man tottered off again along the street.

As we left the village we saw an open-air school, now empty because of the summer holidays. The road led us on through meadows, fields and dark forest.

'What is the name of this village?' after an hour or so we asked a girl, who was riding a bicycle with some difficulty along the narrow path.

'Pernovo,' the girl nodded as she rode on.

I might not have remembered anything about this village except the name, if we had not thought of getting a drink of milk there. After this we drank milk at every village we came to, so that at the end of the day, by a rough estimate, we must each of us have consumed three or four litres. It was in Pernovo that we ventured to ask for milk for the first time.

The woman at whose window we knocked first, put down her sewing (she was working with a sewing-machine), and sent us on to a neighbour.

'She should have some. We don't keep a cow.'

Her neighbour regretfully shook her head.

'No, my dears, we have six mouths in the family, we drink it all. But go past that boarded house, then the one with the red roof, go past four more and then ask in the seventh house; they keep a cow and there are not many in the family.'

But we were unlucky here too, although it was the seventh house—there was nobody at home. Then we began to ask at each house in turn, and at once we struck lucky. A plump old woman about sixty years old was sitting at her window, like a picture in a carved frame.

'Do you want a lot?'

'Half a litre or so.'

She disappeared from the window and remained away for ten minutes. Then she brought out two litre jars, in which pickled cucumbers are usually sold. As soon as I tasted it I realised that the milk had been watered down by a third, if not a half. It was impossible to drink such a tasteless wash, it

was fit only to pour on the ground. Rosa said softly to herself:

'Here's a kind woman—she's sold us rich, creamy milk. But there are some dishonest old women who sell skim-milk, or even milk watered down. If you joggle the jar, the sides of the jar remain quite clean.' So saying of course she joggled the jar, and of course the sides remained quite clean.

The old woman turned purple.

'Do you think that I need your money? There it is!' She threw it on the ground, but immediately took it up again, when she saw Rosa making a movement towards it.

I took advantage of the confusion and poured my milk into the dust. It remained there a long time as a little bluish puddle, not sinking into the ground nor spreading. A small boy, aged about seven, probably her grandson, carrying a fishing-rod, watched the scene attentively.

There was a little shop almost opposite the old woman's house. We went into it more from curiosity than from any need. Here is a list of its stock, which I carefully noted down: broken loaf-sugar, feeding-bottles, jam, tinned cod, wheat and rice concentrates, salted herring, soya flour, rusks (made from black bread), sweets and little spiced cakes. This shop differed from other village shops which we saw later in respect that the jam was not fermented and there was no melting halva on the counter.

The young saleswoman said that there was bread in this village shop every day, brought from Pokrov, the nearest town. We told her about the old woman and the milk.

'Oh, she's an old witch!' the girl said angrily. 'She's a real swindler! You shouldn't have anything to do with her. As for the shop, it would have more goods perhaps, but I'm not really the shop-keeper, I'm the club manager.'

'Then why are you behind the counter?'

'The former shop-keeper behaved rather like that old woman. Flour costs two roubles forty-five copecks, and he sold it for three roubles ten copecks. So he's been taken off to prison, and temporarily I have to look after the shop.'

From the very first day it had become clear that we should have to walk in the early morning and the evening, for already by eleven o'clock the temperature was up into the eighties. It became difficult to breathe, we poured with sweat, and when

I took off the rucksack, steam rose up from the small of my back as if an iron had been applied to it. We decided to lie in the shade from eleven until four or even five, if possible near a stream.

On leaving Pernovo, where our first attempt to drink milk had been so unsuccessful, we soon came to a small river which ran right across our path. Its brown water made its way through meadow flowers and among bushes, branchy willows and brooms, which carefully shielded it from the greedy sun. Our rest by this river was not distinguished by anything remarkable, except that we watched six lads busy with a net in a small pool. Their efforts over half an hour were rewarded by the catch of a small pike weighing four hundred grammes, and a roach. Two men came up, scrutinised the catch and said seriously: 'Oho, not bad.' This comment, one must think, was due not to the politeness of the men, but to the dimensions of the river and its resources of fish.

Exhausted by the heat and with aching limbs (we had not yet grown used to the exercise), we struggled on farther. The map showed a small rectangle ahead of us—some place called Golovino. This became our cherished goal for the day. We would come to Golovino by the evening, ask for a samovar and have a good rest.

Meanwhile from behind came sounds which could easily be recognised as the rumble of a lorry, lurching along the rough road. It says much for our resolution that neither of us raised a hand to stop it.

A round, freckled face with a wide grin poked out from the driver's cab.

'Get in, why torment yourselves?'

We got in and almost without noticing it found ourselves in Golovino. Only one spot on the way there has been imprinted on my memory. A quagmire, poisonously green, stretching from the road deep into the forest, was surrounded by dead trees. At first these were small firs, then taller ones, and finally big blackened and poisoned firs and pines. The front rows of little firs had already fallen into the quagmire and were drowning in it. Others seemed to be on their knees, submerged up to the waist. The combination of poisonous green and the black trees made a frightening impression.

When we reached the outskirts of Golovino, we paid our driver, and set off through the village. We were met by an elderly woman, carelessly dressed, barefoot and somewhat dishevelled, as it seemed to us. She was running and loudly clanging a bell, such as is used in schools to summon the pupils to their classes.

We chose the most tidy-looking house and knocked on the window.

‘Can you have us for the night?’

‘Who are you?’

‘Wanderers returning to our native land.’

‘Come in with God!’

God had brought us to the kolkhoz office.

We went up a narrow staircase and were confronted by the locked door of the chairman’s office. In a room on the right sat the book-keeper and the accountant. The building had a dismal appearance. The walls were black from soot, and blue wallpaper hung in ribbons. The ceiling was charred in the centre, and the paper was torn away from it; evidently a lamp must have been hung up too close and nearly caused a fire. Sunflower seed husks crunched on the floor under our feet.

We were not invited to sit. After a moment’s hesitation we seated ourselves.

The sound of a woman scolding and shouting rose up from below, and soon she herself appeared. We recognised her as the woman who had been running through the village with the bell. It was she who was to guide us to our night’s lodging.

‘What work do you do in the kolkhoz?’ we asked her.

‘I am called a brigade leader. The village is so spread out, and I have to run from end to end of it, and bow low to each person, begging him to come out to work. Nowadays, it is true, they come of themselves and complain besides if I forget to assign them to a job.’

‘Why is that?’

‘They’ve begun to get money for the work done, things are looking up. But in the past—it made you weep! Have a talk tomorrow with the chairman, he’ll tell you all about it.’

‘Why do you run round with a bell?’

‘I call the kolkhozniks to work. I run round in the morning, and at dinnertime, and whenever there is need.’

‘In other villages this is done more simply; a piece of railing or a buffer is hung up on a post, and the brigade leader comes and beats on it with an iron rod.’

‘I don’t know what our people would think of that; it would be better of course.’

‘What do you think yourself? You’re the brigade leader, you’ve only to give the order.’

At this point we reached our destination. For our night’s lodging we had been assigned to a spacious house, which smelled of washed walls and cleanliness.

The young mistress of the house showed us a shed with hay. But it was last year’s, musty hay, and a mouldy dampness wafted up from the cellar, so we remained in the house.

Toys made of fir-cones were hanging from the ceiling, the disk of a loudspeaker was fixed to the wall, there were icons in the corner, and a gramophone and records on top of a cupboard. A sewing-machine stood next to it. The whole floor was spread with soft rugs, made of pieces of rag of many colours. Pictures of the different breeds of hens were stuck on the glass door of the china cupboard. To embellish the walls there were posters: a picture of a famous stallion and of a huge, pink boar, an invitation to join the Red Cross, a picture of three Pioneers holding books and smiling, and finally a poster with the slogan ‘Play Volley-Ball!’ From the window there was a view of a wide meadow, a stream and then the forest.

The young housewife began to busy herself with the samovar. She told us that she did not work on the kolkhoz, but stayed at home to look after the children. Her mother-in-law, Nastya, worked on the farm.

‘And where is your husband?’

‘He works in the carpenters’ brigade; they are building a pigsty and sheep-pen. There’s a lot of building being done on the kolkhoz. But today the whole brigade has gone fishing.’

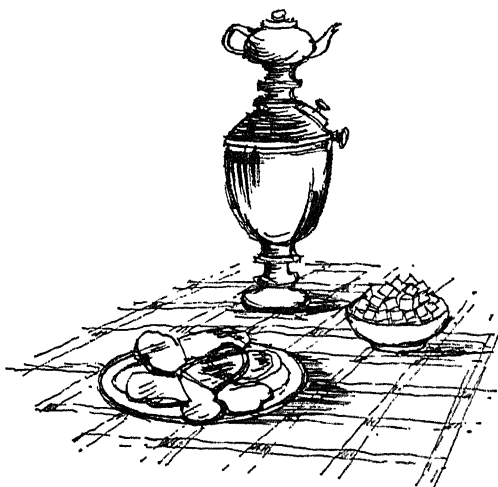
‘Is it a rest-day?’

‘The chairman has gone to Pokrov, and it is too hot to work, so they’ve gone fishing. They’ll soon be back, then they’ll begin to drink and lark about till midnight.’

She put the samovar on the table together with a bowl of small lumps of sugar and a plate of black bread.

My grandfather liked to drink tea with a towel; that is to say,

he hung a towel round his neck and drank up to fifteen glasses of tea, wiping away the abundant sweat. Evidently there was something of my grandfather in me, because I was soon in need of a towel. We had been walking in the heat all day, and besides the tea was unusually fragrant and delicious. But although we tried to find out from our hostess what kind of tea



it was and how she prepared it, we could get no answer from her. She only said that her mother-in-law made the tea, and that when she came in, she would tell us, if she wished.

It began to grow dark and a tall, dry old woman made her appearance. This was Aunt Nastya. We bombarded her with questions about the tea. She smiled with pleasure that her tea was praised, but she made light of it.

‘What’s special about it? It’s just leaves that we drink.’

‘Yes, but what leaves?’

‘You can drink strawberry leaves, or raspberry, some like cranberry, and some make a blend.’

‘Do you just dry them in the oven?’

‘That would be very simple. But you must know too when to pick the leaves . . .’

‘Tell us, when?’

But the old woman could not be prevailed on to tell us how she made such fragrant tea. She gave us a handful to take on

our way, shaking out all that remained in a huge sack, but she would not tell her secret.

Since then I have read a recipe for making tea from strawberry and raspberry leaves, but I don't think that the old woman had used that recipe. I have had no opportunity of tasting the tea made from the recipe, but I can say without exaggeration that I have never drunk any better tea than that old woman's. I can only add that it was a beautiful dark golden colour.

About eleven o'clock, when we were dropping off to sleep, the master of the house returned from fishing. He turned the loudspeaker on full blast, then went off to drink. He came back at two in the morning, and a little later began to grunt and groan that his head ached. However, when we got up, he was not there. So we never saw our host.

The Third Day

A day which is packed with events and impressions flies past quickly, but afterwards in our memory it seems very long. An uneventful day (if, for example, we have been lounging from morning till night on the sofa), drags on like a year, but when we come to recall it, there is an empty space, as though it had never been.

On our travels we had crowded days, and now that the time has passed, it seems as if our tour had lasted not forty days, but much, much longer.

Early next morning, having breakfasted off milk, bread and boiled eggs (this was our usual food for breakfast, dinner and supper), we set off to look for the kolkhoz chairman. This was a man of thirty-eight, clean-shaven with a pink face. He proved to be a voluble talker.

‘What can I tell you? I have not been chairman long, this is my second year. The kolkhoz had been enlarged and things were going very badly. The kolkhoz workers received only trifling payment for their labour, so they went off to the towns, to Pokrov, Orekhovo-Zuevo, Noginsk. Those who had nowhere to run off to lived by selling mushrooms, berries, and potatoes from their own plots, but they did not come to work on the kolkhoz. But then strict measures were taken for improving conditions of work in the countryside. Last year the farm was split up again, and that was the right move, for the purpose of amalgamation, which is to make wide fields, is not achieved in our country here, which is all cut up by ravines or forest and clumps of trees. And it is more difficult for the management—everything is far away and out of sight. But when the farms were divided up, we fared badly here in Golovino: we were given the worst cows, the oldest hens and the leanest pigs, they ran about like dogs.

‘Well, we began to get the kolkhoz on its feet. No one came out to work, so we offered an advance of three roubles a day. The kolkhoznik began to bestir himself. The year came to an

end and we were giving five roubles for a work-unit. Oho, how excited the people were! An old woman of eighty-five comes along and grumbles: "Why don't you give me some work?" "All right", I say, "rear up some chickens. I'll pay you for each chick." So the old woman took charge of six hundred chicks.'

Of course the chairman was a boastful fellow and took the credit for all manner of things for which he was not responsible. But this was not important—the chief point was that the kolkhoz was certainly on the upgrade.

We had come on our expedition precisely at the time when the results of state measures and decrees were beginning to show themselves in the countryside. To take a jump ahead, I can say that in every village we saw new cow-sheds, pig-sties, sheep-pens and barns. In all the kolkhozes, even the very poor ones (and we shall soon come to one of these), there was a feeling of animation; manure which had been accumulating for years was being spread on the fields, cows were giving more milk. I imagined such a situation as this: suppose that in a hundred years some historian should take up the newspapers of today and copy out from them nothing but the figures of milk yield in the kolkhozes. From these figures alone, and disregarding all other facts, he would be bound to conclude that about 1953–1954 something occurred, as a consequence of which the cows (throughout the whole country!) began to give more milk. We deliberately did not leave out a single village but asked everywhere if this was so. The answer was always the same.

On opening up the map we saw that there were no roads or tracks at all from Golovino into the heart of Opolye, which was our objective, but that the roads led to the town of Pokrov, that is, back almost to the point where we had started. A few centimetres from Golovino the village of Zhary beckoned to us alluringly, but the space between these two villages was covered entirely by the colour green, and there was only a tiny blue thread of some stream called Kuchebzha cutting through the forest tract. However, as we looked at the map we saw clearly that Zhary was the key to Opolye, that there we should come to tracks leading to the town of Kolchugino, and from there it was no great distance to Yuriev-Polsky—the 'capital' of Vladimir Opolye. This way would lead us into the heart of

the district, whereas if we returned to Pokrov we should come out again on the motorway between Moscow and Gorky, returning to the surface instead of plunging deeper in. That is why, although the Golovino chairman promised us a car as far as Pokrov, we decided to force a way through the forest and come out at Zhary.

'I don't advise it,' the chairman shook his head. 'You might get to the Makhova lodge all right; but from there you would certainly get lost. There is no road to Zhary. Even for us this is untravelled country. When you set off into the forest, you'll see a path, overgrown, but still a path. Then you will see other paths leading off to the right and left, and what will you do? Even if you come to the stream Kuchebzha and try to follow along the bank to Zhary, it will be heavy going, for you will have to make your way through bushes, wild raspberry canes, nettles and swamp. The stream winds and this will treble the distance. I would give you a horse, but you couldn't get through at all with a horse. In places the ground is too swampy.'

Nevertheless we decided to go that way.

Then the chairman summoned a man called Petrovich, who alone was familiar with the way and could explain it all to us.

Petrovich was a dark-haired man with stubble on his face and a red, swollen eyelid. He made a painstaking attempt to explain all the twists and turns of the way, but finally got confused himself and said suddenly:

'All right, I'll go with you for a few kilometres, and show you the way from there. All the same you'll get lost!'

So accompanied by Petrovich we plunged into the forest.

Anyone who has walked in forests at all will immediately distinguish kolkhoz forest from state forest. Kolkhoz forest is cluttered up; twigs, broken boughs and tree-tops lie rotting on the ground (it is only the trunk which is worth carting away); extraordinarily high stumps stick up on all sides (to cut them lower, the men would have had to trample down the snow and stoop right down to the ground); then there are decaying trees, which have been sawn through, but for some reason have not been carted away. In a kolkhoz forest the trees are felled at random, without any system, and the young growth is not cut down. There is no question here of the paths

scattered with sand to serve as fire-breaks, such as we saw by the Vvedensky lake.

On the other hand when you go into a state forest, you seem to be entering a well-tended room; here there is space, beauty and splendour. Branches do not lie around where they have fallen, but are stacked in neat piles, ready for burning or carting away. You will not see tall stumps, but if there are any stumps at all, they are on a clearing where all the trees have been felled. The empty spaces are planted with young trees, set in straight lines.

At first Petrovich led us through kolkhoz forest—there was no doubt of that. However, we were more occupied with listening to him than with looking around. When you are walking with a guide, you don't take notice of the way.

Our conversation with Petrovich gradually revealed in him a type of peasant for whom the whole world narrows down like a wedge, and there at the extreme tip there beckons to him nothing else but a round copper copeck. Whatever the subject of our talk might be, Petrovich was always able to bring it back to one and the same thing.

On entering a deep forest it was only natural to expect that Rosa would ask a certain question, and sure enough she soon asked it.

'Are there any wolves in the forest?'

'It's full of them,' Petrovich said reassuringly. 'But they're difficult to catch. Last year one of them ran into my barn. I soon put an end to him. He was a young wolf and brought me in some cash—five hundred roubles!'

'I expect there are plenty of mushrooms here!' I said, aiming to turn the conversation from the unpleasant topic of wolves.

'Plenty! One year soon after the war I salted eighteen pails of them and sold them to a catering establishment for eighteen half-litres of vodka.'

'Why did you want so much of that stuff? Besides it's cheaper now.'

'It's cheaper now, but in those days vodka was selling at 120 roubles a half-litre in the market. Just reckon that up.'

'Do you still salt mushrooms?'

'Yes, I do. Drivers are always drawing up at my place. They

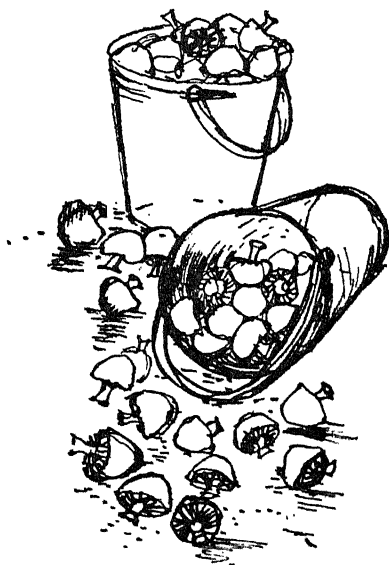
need a bite to eat, and there's nothing so good as salted mushrooms for a snack. I get sausage from them in exchange.'

We fell silent. Petrovich suddenly broke into the hush, saying reflectively:

'It would be good to get a wood-grouse!'

'Are you fond of shooting?'

'Naturally, since a grouse has four kilogrammes of solid meat



on it, and you can get ten roubles a kilogramme. A hunter from Perovo had a bit of luck.'

'What treasure did he find?'

'No treasure. He was attacked by a lynx. We shall come to a glade soon, it was near there.'

'A fine bit of luck!'

'Why, he killed the lynx, of course. There's a reward for that, and the skin has its price too.'

'Petrovich, why do you know this way better than anyone else?' I inquired, again wishing to turn the conversation from a dangerous subject.

'At one time I used to drive to Kostino for provisions. I kept it up for about a year. That is the track which I made.' He pointed to some ruts almost overgrown with grass. 'I got into

the habit of bringing back one log on each journey. In the course of a year I built up such a pile of logs that if I had sold them . . .’

But at this point we came to the decisive parting of our ways, so we never heard what Petrovich would have gained from the sale of his stack of logs.

‘Bear left all the time,’ Petrovich explained, ‘and you will come to the Makhova lodge. Inquire the way from the forester there. From the lodge you will have rather more than half way still to go. You may meet some elk on the path, or you will hear them crashing in the bushes, but don’t be alarmed. Elk are peaceful creatures. If only you could get one, there would be poods of solid meat, as well as the horns and skin . . .’

But by this time we had thanked Petrovich warmly and left him alone to his dreams of elk, to which he would doubtless have given no quarter had there not been the risk of paying a fine of ten thousand roubles for each one killed. I think that he would have risked going to prison, that is no great misfortune, but ten thousand roubles! That would make one’s hand shake!

Petrovich set off home and for the first time we looked attentively around. We did not see a lynx behind each twig, but the forest encircled us so densely, the depths of it were so dark, and this darkness was so near to us, that we could not help thinking that perhaps the chairman was right, and we should not have penetrated into such a jungle. However, we were not so much alarmed by the density and the darkness of the forest as by the faintness of the track; at times it vanished entirely, and we had to take fifteen or so paces by guesswork before again coming on some sign of a path.

Almost immediately after saying goodbye to Petrovich we came to a damp, muddy spot. We made our way across, leaping from tussock to slippery log, from log to rotten tree-stump. Having crossed this swamp, we had to look for the continuation of our track, and finally realised that there was nothing but a path trodden by some cloven-hoofed animals.

‘An elk path, of course,’ Rosa said pessimistically. ‘That is hardly likely to lead us to the Makhova lodge!’

‘Wait a bit, it may have been trodden by cows. Herds of cattle sometimes graze in the forest. We must look for the droppings along the path, they will tell us what animal has

been along here. If you see big, elongated nut-shape droppings (before our departure I had been reading Formozov), it will mean that we really are on an elk path.'

Elongated nuts were not slow to appear, they were scattered everywhere on the track. However we searched, we could see no sign of a man's footprint or a horse's hoof-mark on the ground. There was hope of course that the elk would bring us to water, perhaps the Kuchebzha, and then willy-nilly we should have to follow along its bank.

'Look, a new print,' Rosa cried in alarm, 'and what a big one!'

'That's a dog's footprint,' I said to reassure her, although I myself did not know what kind of a dog would leave a footprint the size of a man's hand on the moist ground. Evidently a crafty old grey wolf was following slowly behind a herd of elk, in case a foolish young one should lag behind.

'I'll recite you some poetry,' I proposed, in order to distract and amuse my companion, and searching my memory I chose some verses appropriate to the occasion:

*You are going, young and gay,
You do not know weariness,
Firmly believing that each byway
Will bring you to the railroad.*

*You tread confidently,
Knowing there is no danger,
That any forest path
Will lead at last to a dwelling.*

*But as we roam through the world
Into deep forest or swamp,
Sometimes the path disappears
Leaving no mark nor sign . . .*

'What next?' asked Rosa apprehensively.

'That's all.'

'Thank you, you've reassured me greatly.'

I realised myself that the lines I had chosen fitted the occasion almost too well, but it was too late. However, now the elk track was crossed by a narrow, winding road. It was thickly overgrown with grass, and young birch saplings, only just taller

than the grass, filled the ruts, disappearing in two rows into the distance. Here there was more light and sun, and we felt more cheerful; we believed now that we should eventually arrive somewhere. Since we had turned into detectives with a keen eye for footprints, here too we brushed aside the grass and investigated to see who had been along this way before us. Effort is always crowned with success. We soon discovered a fairly clear bicycle track. Where there was a break in the grass and the ground was moist, the markings of the tyres were quite distinct. It is true that we were not astute enough to guess in which direction the cyclist had gone, nor whether it had been a long time ago, still less could we determine the make of the cycle or the profession of the cyclist, as an experienced detective in a thriller would certainly have been able to do.

We came next to an old clearing, overgrown with dense, low scrub, like a sheep's fleece. A few copper-red pines, which had been spared from the felling or perhaps had been left to scatter their seed on the ground, rose straight and majestically from the scrub. The wind could now blow freely through their high, green canopy, and there was nothing to prevent the seeds being scattered far abroad. The pines stood solitary at a distance from one another, and seemed to brood, like veterans who by some miracle have survived the destruction of a once mighty army. To judge by these last beautiful trees, a well-tended grove of ship timber had once stood here, murmuring and creaking as it swayed in the wind.

It became hot and stifling as soon as we came into the clearing. There was no shade, and the midday sun poured down. Unusually tall and lush globe-flowers glittered in the sunlight, rivalling it in brilliance. Each flower was like a yellow rose. Collected in a bunch, these flowers smelt of coolness and river mist. Sometimes the road went through wide stretches of lilies-of-the-valley in full flower and splendour. We knew that we were approaching these by reason of the scent some thirty or forty paces beforehand. Like the globe-flowers, the lilies-of-the-valley were unusually big and lush. Their leaves were almost the width of my palm, the flowers almost the size of a hazel-nut, seemed more like some exotic, foreign growth. So we proceeded for two hours or more, not

knowing whether we were going in the right direction or diverging more and more from our goal.

The historic cry of the sailor of Columbus, who shouted from his look-out 'Land!' has not been recorded on a tape, so that we do not know what emotion and delight sounded in his hoarse, thirsty voice. This lack might have been remedied if we had had a tape-recorder with us, even though the word was different. Rosa did not wait to recollect what the Makhova lodge should look like, but simply shouted: 'A hut!' At the same time she danced and clapped her hands, which Columbus's sailor probably did not do. However, who knows!

The Makhova lodge proved to be a timber house, surrounded by a palisade. The forest was close up to it on one side, while a wide flowery meadow stretched away from the other, at the farther end of which we guessed there was a stream. A hundred paces from the house on open ground stood a mighty birch-tree. A whole company of soldiers could have disposed themselves in its shade, so that we two had plenty of room to spread ourselves out.

In the forest it had been impossible to sit down to rest, or



even to stop, because swarms of fat, yellow mosquitoes immediately appeared; it was hard to know what they could have eaten to get so fat. Here in the meadow there was a breeze, and while we rested not a single mosquito buzzed round our ears. This in itself was bliss enough.

Having furnished our resting-place, that is, having spread out all that we could on the flowers, we set off to the house to reconnoitre. I peered in at the window and saw seven (no, not robbers), but simply hearty peasants sitting at the table. Before them were two aluminium bowls filled with macaroni, and several jugs of milk. Loaves of bread were piled one on another at the edge of the table.



A girl, presumably the forester's daughter, was working in the garden near the house, and we got into conversation with her. It appeared that neither the forester nor his wife were at home; they had gone out at three in the morning either to plant or dig round young firs, and had not yet returned.

'Could we buy some milk and bread?'

'I have given all the milk there was to the workmen (evidently the men sitting indoors), and I have not milked the cow again.'

'When will it be time to milk?'

'I could milk her straightaway, but would you want to drink milk fresh from the cow on such a hot afternoon?'

'Lower it into the well, and it will cool.'

'If you are not in a hurry, I will do that.'

The girl ran off into the forest, from where we heard her calling: 'Zorka! Zorka, Zorka, where have you got to, you devil!'

A little bell jangled and Zorka, a plump, dignified cow, came out into the clearing. She walked proudly, as though aware of her great importance in the life of human beings. Laxness, that witty Icelandic writer, has observed that the cow still remains as before a more valuable unit than, for example, a jet aeroplane.

'She's a fine lady,' the girl said, as the first stream of milk tinkled against the bottom of the pail. 'Look what an estate she owns. Do you suppose that she eats any grass that is in front of her? No, she walks around the whole day, selecting a blade of grass here, a leaf there. She's absolutely spoilt, and she gives herself such airs. Put her on straw for a month, and she'd soon give up her airs!'

The cow listened to the chatter of her young mistress and artlessly chewed the cud. Meanwhile the yellow, buttery froth rose higher and higher in the pail—fresh cow's milk, which contains everything necessary for the support of human life, and which will guarantee you iron health if you drink it every day. It is said that the taste of the milk and its nutritional value also depend on the grass which the cow has eaten. Evidently Zorka knew which forest grass to choose, for her milk was not only good to taste, but also had a special aroma.

We sat beneath the birch-tree for four hours, luxuriating in the rest. It is true that I deprived myself of forty minutes of it by going down to the stream. Yellow patches in the meadow, as I drew nearer, turned out to be clumps of kingcups, viper's grass and goatsbeard, which as children, I remember, we called soldier's food. Its juicy stems, which are very sweet, spurt out a thick, white milk, which leaves black stains on one's face, hands and shirt. The soft pink in the meadow was due to the tiny-petalled spikes of bistort.

As was to be expected, the Kuchebzha proved to be a small forest stream with icy, almost black, water. When I stepped into it, my leg sank into soft mud above the knee, and a quantity of little bubbles rose with a squelch to the surface.

The forester's daughter earnestly and lengthily explained the way to us, declared that we had a long walk before us to our

haven, and finally consoled us by saying: 'All the same, you'll never get there by yourselves, you'll lose the way.'

Then we turned to the workmen, who had long ago finished their meal and were sitting at their ease in the shade, smoking.

'My God, no! Wait for Makhov, he'll tell you exactly, but we don't know. We're from Pokrov. We only know that the Potapychev lodge is on your way.'

We could not wait for Makhov. To spend the night in the forest was not an inviting prospect.

Once again the cycle track was our guide. We grew so accustomed to it that when we came to a fork and we had a choice of turning to the left, where there was no cycle track, we chose the right, where the cyclist had been.

After one and a half kilometres we saw a youth in a blue shirt sitting in the middle of the path, his bicycle lying beside him. Pouring with sweat, he was carefully stuffing his tyre with dry grass.

'An accident?'

'Yes, a puncture, and I have nothing to mend it with. I have to use anything that is to hand.'

'Are we going right for Zhary?'

'Zhary? I don't know. This is the path to Kostino, but to Zhary—I don't know.'

'Do you know the Potapychev lodge?'

'Yes, you should have turned left at the fork. You did wrong to come this way. This path leads to Kostino.'

We had to retrace our steps. All the same we had solved the puzzle of the mysterious cycle track. It had been made by a resourceful lad in a blue shirt. It would be interesting to know whether the dry grass would do the trick for him.

'Even when we get to Zhary there may not be anything interesting there,' Rosa said thoughtfully.

'There is no need for anything interesting at Zhary.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because we are making soup from an axe. Our whole expedition is making soup from an axe.'

'What soup are you talking about?' She said in annoyance, being a great specialist in soups, and her annoyance was all the greater because we had begun to long for soup during the past three days.

‘Don’t you know the story “How the soldier made soup from an axe”? Then listen.

‘A soldier stopped for the night in the cottage of an old woman and said to her: “Grandma, Grandma, you should make some soup.” “I have nothing to make it with, young sir. Search as you may, the cottage is empty.” “We don’t need anything, we can make it from an axe. Here is an axe, but wash it well.” The old woman was curious: how would the soldier make soup from an axe? He dropped the axe into a pot, put it on to boil, stirred and tasted. “It will be good soup, Grandma, rich, only there is not enough salt.” Out of curiosity to see what he would do, the old woman gave him some salt. “It will be good soup, Grandma, rich, only we should add some barley.” The old woman gave him some barley. The soldier blew on it and tasted again. “It will be good, rich soup, only it just needs a spoonful of fat.” They added the fat. “Now let’s have dinner,” the soldier said, drawing out his axe and putting it back in his knapsack . . . It is just the same with us too. There may not be anything interesting in Zhary, there may not be anything interesting even in Kolchugino, but think of all we see and hear while on the way there!’

In front of us we heard a dog’s furious barking. We had come to the Potapychev lodge. An old woman with a black kerchief on her head told us that we should soon come to Kolobrodovo, and that Zhary was quite close.

Great was our delight when we came through the last lines of trees and the mighty forest released us into the freedom of the meadows, dotted here and there with gay little copses. This was Kolobrodovo. A middle-aged woman was coming from the stream, carrying two full buckets on a yoke. As she approached her house, we went up to her and asked for a drink. But the river water was warm and therefore repulsive. The heat had kept at over eighty degrees all day. Here we sat down to rest.

The woman had a long, delicate face with big, grey eyes, but the delicacy and tenderness of the face were only glimpsed beneath the wrinkled and coarsened mask. In a similar way you may catch sight of the gilt frame of a fine picture or the edge of a grand piano from beneath a heap of rubble, and these will reveal to you what the house was like before it became a ruin.

In Kolobrodovo the houses stood wide apart, and in the gaps between them one could see two or three holes, overgrown with burdock and nettles. In some places there stood a complete stove with its chimney, or more often there were bricks piled into a stack. Or there might be nothing left at all—just two trees with nesting-boxes for starlings and a riot of weeds. It was reminiscent of a mouth in which the teeth have fallen out from scurvy. Some houses were standing, still in good repair, but securely boarded up.

‘Yes, there are very few houses left,’ the woman agreed. ‘After the war everyone went off—to Pokrov, Orekhovo, Noginsk and Moscow. Life was hard here in those years. In Loshaky there is only one house left. Aunt Polya lives there, and she too now wants to move to Zhary. Well, they would have brought her to Zhary, but the roads were too muddy, and besides there was no one to go for her; there are no men in the whole kolkhoz. In other kolkhozes we hear that things are on the mend, but here they have come to such a pass that I don’t know how they will be put right. The chief trouble is the lack of people. Well, they will explain it to you better in Zhary. The chairman lives there.’

We proceeded now along a field path. The Kuchebzha had emerged from the forest when we did and now flowed close to the path, but there were no longer wild angelica nor mint, willow-herb nor cow-parsley on its banks—nothing but sedge all the way.

The twilight was closing in when at last we came to the village of Zhary, which that morning had seemed so inaccessible. Telephone poles stood along the street in a line which stretched beyond the outskirts and into the forest. It was also very noticeable that while the other trees were normal and healthy, the willows were withered and yellow. If you stood beneath them, moisture dripped down from the branches. The leaves were like little tubes, and when you unrolled one you found foam and little grubs inside. Some pestilence had fallen on the willows of Zhary and destroyed them all.

We asked an old man sitting in his doorway about the willows, and he replied:

‘Who knows what the cause is! It’s just as though the trees had been scalded.’

The kolkhoz office was in the house of the former wealthy landowner, a large building with brick foundations and faced with boarding. The porch, which at one time had been glassed, only had one pane of thick, frosted glass left.

At this evening hour there was no one about in the office. We wandered through the corridors and unlocked rooms, looking for some signs of life. At last in the very end room we discovered a young woman, lying on a couch and playing with a little girl. We got into conversation with her, and she told us her story.

‘I have had bad fortune. I married and came to this village, now we are divorced. I myself am from Kolchugino. The kolkhoz there is much more prosperous than this one, and I made plans to run back there, but the chairman has persuaded me to stay. He’s given me this room here in the office. I don’t know how it will all turn out.’

We did not linger in the empty building. We had to think about our night’s lodging, and weariness was coming upon us.

But sleep did not come for a long time. I shut my eyes, and out of the darkness came globe-flowers and lilies-of-the-valley, elk-tracks and a thick carpet of pine needles.

The Fourth Day

Perhaps our Moscow friends have gathered together and are thinking of us. 'Yes, they've gone and nobody knows where they have got to.' This remoteness sometimes alarmed us. If something happened to us in the depths of the forest, it would be at least two months before someone would notice it and say: 'Nothing has been heard of them for a long time.'

'They're on the move. They're lost in the great open spaces, like a needle dropped in a pool.'

What does it mean 'to be on the move'? That's a vague term. You in Moscow do not see how at this very minute we are sitting at a freshly scrubbed table, enjoying a morning cup of tea with the mistress of the house, Aunt Domasha.

Aunt Domasha, or if you wish, Domna Grigorievna, is a woman of fifty, strong and solid, dressed in a red and white flowered cotton dress. She raises her saucer to her mouth with dignity, blows on the tea and sips it noisily. At the same time we chat.

'A wealthy contractor called Gorshkov used to live where the kolkhoz offices are now. He had a fine estate here. There was a clear, deep pond. Guests used to visit him from Moscow, all elegant people, evidently gentry, no matter that he himself was of peasant stock. They used to walk about and though it was hot and dry, they would carry umbrellas. For appearances' sake, it seems, or to give authority. If he built houses for other people, could he build a poor one for himself? He had water laid on, stone cellars.'

'If you took over a good house, you should have looked after it.'

'How could we! Our kolkhoz has had a great many chairmen, and each one has felt himself to be only temporary: No matter what, they all say, I'll be chucked out. Each year we have a new chairman. There was one good one, it's true, but as soon as he began to show firmness, we turned against him. We began to complain to the district office. He wasn't much

in favour there, he talked to them too firmly. If you know better than I do, he used to say, come and take my place. So they kicked him out! But he could have got the kolkhoz in order. To tell the truth, we had a lot of workers then. When we went out to the haymaking, it was a fine sight! But now if a bridge gets broken, there is no one to repair it. The present chairman has repaired them himself—in the night-time, so as not to be shamed by people seeing him. In the beginning the kolkhoz was a good one, and we lived well. Then it got worse and worse, and people began to leave it. Now they have begun to cart the houses away—to Pokrov and Kolchugino. We had a woman chairman called Muravieva—even she ran off. “Where’s the chairman?” people would say. And she had been back in the town for a long while. I have a son living in Pokrov, life’s not much easier for him there—he has to pay for lodging, pay for food; he’d come back soon enough to the kolkhoz, if the workers got any pay. Other kolkhozes have begun to make payments, we hear, but ours is still in a poor way. Go and admire our cattle-yard. You can’t even see it, it’s buried under dung. The walls are rotting because of the dung, while the fields are starved. Who is to cart it out? And what in? There are two carts for the whole kolkhoz, and one of these is without a wheel. All the same a few loads have been carted out this year.’

Our tea-drinking came to an end. We went out of the cottage and sat down on the grass in the shade of the house. We spread out the map and calculated how to make our way to Kolchugino.

A man of about thirty-five rode up to us on a bicycle; he was dark-haired, clean-shaven, and had his shirt sleeves rolled up. He dismounted and said curtly:

‘Your papers?’

‘May I ask for yours?’

It appeared that the man had no papers.

‘I am the local chairman. Ask Aunt Domasha there.’

I gave him our passports, but he did not look at them.

‘I don’t need these. I want to know who you are.’

‘It’s all written down there: Soviet citizenship, sex, age, marriage.’

‘But what’s your reason for being here? What’s the map?’

‘We’re travelling. We’re checking our route by the map. Surely that’s allowed?’

‘What do you mean —travelling? What for? Who sent you? What are you jotting down in that notebook?’

To put an end to the matter I showed the chairman my card certifying that I was a correspondent of the magazine *Ogonyok*, and also my membership card of the Writer’s Union.

‘Oh yes! But where is your document from Pokrov? There should be a document from Pokrov.’

Matters were soon sorted out, and the chairman, Fedor Yakovlevich, sat down beside us.

‘You go about, ask questions and make notes,’ he said. ‘You see a poor kolkhoz and straightway you write down in your book: “The chairman is no good!” You ought to be in my shoes. I came from the town to put things right, but first of all give me some workers. Who is there to help me to put things right? The kolkhoz has a debt to the state of three hundred thousand roubles, which goes on from year to year. But we haven’t got a copeck in hand. We were given a loan to build cattle-sheds, but we had to spend the money on implements and seed, and the result was that we have neither cattle-sheds nor money. We had to pay an advance to the kolkhozniks. We gave them three roubles in April. Now for the second month I have not paid them anything; I’ve nothing to pay them with. I had eleven and a half thousand roubles of my own, which I saved when I lived in town. I’ve given it all over to the kolkhoz. It’s just as though I had tried to feed an elephant with a pea. It’s the same picture as before: I haven’t the money, nor has the kolkhoz. So there is nothing to interest you here. You should go farther!’

Aunt Domasha had mentioned that Zhary was famous for its bowls. Then I remembered that in days past my father would come back from market and set out a row of bowls on the table. They were light and made a ringing noise, and they had little bits of straw inside. They ranged from a huge one (big enough to hold soup for the whole family) down to a tiny one, just right for a child’s porridge, and they were so clean and looked so fragile that one was afraid to pick one up, let alone put it in the oven. ‘Where do they come from?’ my mother asked. ‘From Zhary.’

‘There is an old man here who remembers everything. The chairman lodges with him,’ Aunt Domasha informed us.

As we went through the village, we entered a shop and saw

an old man with so much the appearance of a bygone age that he would have been a good subject for a picture. He was vigorous, with a small white beard and wore a tall cap with a shiny peak and a dark shirt with a twisted girdle round the waist; he was buying salted cod, fastidiously turning it over from one side to the other by the tail. We had little doubt that this was grandfather Anton, 'who knows everything', but all the same we inquired:

'Do you know the old man with whom the chairman lodges?'

'Go quickly, he is just going out.'

'We don't want the chairman, but his host.'

The old man was taken aback and confessed frankly:

'And I thought that so long as I lived, no one would want me any more.'

We accompanied him through the village. Grandfather Anton was now seventy-six. He had the appearance of a reserved, well-bred person, accustomed to respect others and to demand respect for himself. Yes, he used to work as foreman at the pottery works. Altogether there used to be five such pottery works in Zhary, producing annually up to three hundred thousand articles of various kinds: saucers, bowls, mugs, flower-pots. Sixty-five workers were employed in this trade. The business had been started long years before, by their ancestors. 'We young ones did not remember it,' that is how he spoke of himself, 'We young ones!' Why had the business collapsed? Firstly, demand had fallen off, since people increasingly used aluminium and iron vessels. Then the factory began to be transferred from hand to hand; now it would be managed by the district, then by the kolkhoz. Five years ago someone in authority had thought of making tiles from the local clay. He had summoned Grandfather Anton and asked him whether the clay was suitable. Grandfather Anton had shut his eyes, rubbed some clay between finger and thumb, and said: 'No, not suitable!' Thereupon he was regarded as a wrecker, who put a spoke in the wheel of the district's progress. All the same the production of tiles had no success there.

In the meantime we reached the site of the former pottery works. There still remained a long, low roof supported on posts, the framework of the oven and heaps of potsherds here and there.

We made our way back not through the village street, but

behind the houses through flowery meadows. Suddenly Grandfather Anton turned, removed his cap and made a wide gesture with his arm.

‘What an expanse, isn’t it?’

The yellow and pink meadows were stirred by a gust of wind; a blue wave rolled over them, as though the grasses were bowing to the old man in acknowledgement of his notice of them. With one’s whole breath and being one felt that right from the yellow and pink meadows up to the blue sky itself there was not the tiniest particle of dust or dirt in the air that was harmful to man.

‘Where do people go to, away from these breezes! It is wrong to abandon the earth.’ The old man suddenly grew animated, he straightened his back, his eyes glittered and his voice became stronger. ‘It is wrong to throw away gold. For this is gold, gold!’ And again he swept his arm towards the neighbouring meadows. ‘A time will come when they will realise it. They will understand. They will all return to the land. It cannot be abandoned. Gold . . .’

Then he recollected himself, put on his cap, cleared his throat severely and went on ahead of us without looking back. When we said goodbye to him, there was no longer any animation or fire in his eyes.

Cities are like magnets. Go to the north of the country, to the districts of Novgorod, Pskov and Vologda; in those parts you will hear nothing but Leningrad, Leningrad, Leningrad! One man has found work in Leningrad, someone has gone to Leningrad to shop, a third is going to be a student in a Leningrad institute.

The immense stretches of our country are divided up into the magnetic fields of the great cities. Just as the magnetic force attracts every iron filing, so the cities attract and suck in all the people living in the outlying districts.

But each small town too, which is itself exposed to the pull from outside, is a magnet also. Pokrov is small enough, but what a lot we heard about it while we were going across its ‘magnetic field’. Some people had left for Pokrov, someone’s son is living in Pokrov, the chairman will soon be returning from Pokrov, bread is brought to the village shop from Pokrov . . .

But when we were in Zhary, we heard for the first time a new word —Kolchugino, and from that time we heard it more and more often. Evidently somewhere here we had stepped over an invisible line. Gradually we formed the impression that whatever road we travelled along, it would surely lead us to Kolchugino.

One such road, wide and straight, cut through a young birch forest. How we longed to see a single leaf quiver on a birch-tree, to feel the touch of a light breeze, to see the sun overcast for just a minute! We were tempted to hide in the shade and wait for the heat to pass, but although the direct rays of the sun would perhaps not be so fierce in the shade beneath the trees, yet it would be more stifling there, with less oxygen and more moisture.

Mosquitoes clung to our sweaty bodies, and horse-flies too made their appearance here, so many of them that as we walked and waved our arms, our arms would knock against the horrible things and brush them away. However, we came to the end of the birch wood, then to the end of the fields. The heat is not so deadly for the forest; its effect on the fields is worse. The plants stop growing and switch over to a strict economy of moisture. For them it is like a blockade, and the solution is the same as in a blockade: which will come first—death or help, deliverance and life, in this case in the form of rain.

So far we had not come across a single tea-room on our journey. We had begun to tire of milk, bread and boiled eggs. Spring onions and salt brought a little variety into our menu, but we longed for soup, the most ordinary hot potato soup. Of course if we had stopped for a week in one village, we should have had soup, and porridge too. But it is not possible to go into a peasant's house and ask for soup. Every housewife cooks it in the morning in her Russian stove in just sufficient quantity for her family. Our hopes were placed in a tea-room. We were told that there must surely be one in Vospushky and we hastened our steps thither. We needed Vospushky for another reason too. Since Rosa had set out on this expedition in shoes with high heels, she had been walking barefoot the greater part of the way, and by this time her feet were quite worn out. A nag, however wretched, harnessed to a cart, was now the height of Rosa's dreams.

Vospushky is a long village with two main streets. One could see how hastily it was being patched, renewed and rebuilt, to make up for all that had been left undone during its worst years. Every house had something new—here a porch, there a verandah, a roof, window-frames, a fence, gates—or the whole house.

The building which housed the tea-room was an exception: there was nothing new visible here. We hastened towards the door, but, alas, it was locked on the inside. In desperation I climbed on to a window-sill and saw a bare room with newspapers spread on the floor. A woman stood on a stool and was applying a huge brush to the ceiling.

We sat down on the steps outside the village council offices and wondered what our first request to the local residents should be—hot soup or a horse. But then a woman came up and cast us a word as she passed.

‘Why do you sit there? It’s Sunday, there’s nobody there. It’s a rest-day both in the machine-tractor station and the kolkhoz. Come back tomorrow.’

My rucksack immediately became heavier, as though a couple of weighty bricks had been added to it. Our feet ached more, and our mood changed for the worse.

As we went out of the village, wonderful views opened up to the right hand and the left: there were big ponds, overgrown with water-lilies, sedge and rushes. There were spreading trees both on the banks of the ponds and on islands. These ponds should more truthfully, perhaps, be called swamps, but all the same there were open stretches of water, bright with the reflections of white clouds and the blue sky.

We slackened our pace and were soon overtaken by a young woman. She told us that formerly here there had been ponds



with waterfalls, harbours and swans. They had passed from the hands of the owner (his house stood there on the hill) to the village, and before the war there had been a certain chairman of the village council, who had had the clever idea of destroying the dam and draining the water. Whether he had a further plan of reconstructing the site in a different way, history does not record, but in any case nothing has resulted except bog. Few people now remember this chairman (there have been so many changes during this time!), but the result of his handiwork still endures. However, it would not be too late for the machine-tractor station to set to work even now to clean out the ponds, build up the dam, restore beauty to the land, and bring health to a spot which as it is may well become a breeding-ground of malaria.

Above the ponds was a park. This too was untended; evidently nobody counted it his business. The park had trees from all parts of the world, sixty different sorts, so we were told. We would have walked through it, but as we soon came to thickets of nettles, we turned back.

The former landowner's house, now the machine-tractor station, is still in a good state of repair. But the stone outbuildings, which would have been very useful for a machine tractor station, have been completely destroyed, as though they had been bombed. They could not have fallen into ruin like that of themselves, so they must have been destroyed. But why?

One must distinguish between two kinds of destruction. During the first years after the Revolution the peasants, filled with righteous indignation, not infrequently set fire to the landowners' estates. Thus in Snegirev, which was the property of the harsh Saltykov family, not one brick of their palace has remained whole; it was all turned into heaps of small rubble which are now hardly visible beneath the bushes of lilac which have run wild over them.

But it is quite a different matter when a house is destroyed slowly, gradually, entirely through the neglect of those in whose charge it is. Why should the Vospushky machine-tractor station not undertake the restoration of the stone outbuildings? No matter that they belonged to a landowner—they will be of service in our society too.

Later on our way we bathed in a little stream called the 'Big Lipna'. In spite of the heat of the day, its water was icy cold, because for the greater part of its existence the Big Lipna runs through forest, and at the point where we bathed had only for a little while been running through meadows, and had not had time to grow warm.

We walked on again. A fox ran out from the forest almost under our feet. It was emaciated and shabby, with its fur hanging down in rags. It too was feeling the heat.

Towards the end of the day the forest road descended into a deep ravine, turned sharply to the right, went steeply up the other side and emerged into a large village, Karavaevo, cutting it in two from one end to the other. The houses were all built of stone; Karavaevo had once been a market-town. Some women were seated on a bench in front of a house and surveyed us curiously, wondering what sort of strange, foreign people we were.

'Where can we find a lodging for the night?'

'Who are you?'

'People.'

'From what organisation?'

Oho, sophisticated people!

'Just ourselves, not from any organisation.'

'What can you mean—not from any organisation? That sort of thing doesn't happen.'

Somehow or other we managed to discover the kolkhoz chairman, and he arranged that we should spend the night in a small wooden house with double winter window-frames. It was stuffy and hot within the house, but in a minute Rosa was asleep, stretching herself out somehow on the floor. Nevertheless her diary subsequently revealed the following note for this day: 'The camomile is beginning to come into flower for the first time today. The white petals are already visible, but they are still huddled closely together. Tomorrow they will probably be open. It is the second day that the campanulas are in flower. I saw a carnation with only a single bright petal standing up straight as yet.'

The Fifth Day

Early in the morning when all were asleep, I went on tiptoe from the stifling hot cottage and felt as though I had come out, not into the road, but into some quiet, indescribably translucent sunny water—such freshness surrounded me. The grass was not yet dry from the dew, though it no longer sparkled as it does when big, grey drops hang upon it.

A path led downhill from the main street of the quiet village. The hill became increasingly steep, and there in front gleamed a mist-covered river, and beyond it wide meadows, shimmering with many colours, stretched into the far distance. This was the Peksha, the first river of any size we had met on our travels.

I walked along the bank until I reached the mill dam, which now was broken. The water surged against a little willow clump, which stood up from the broken body of the dam, breaking against it with such force that flakes of foam floated over the quiet mill pond below the dam. Osiers hung over the pool. No fisherman could have looked on this with indifference, for it is precisely such mill ponds which are described in fishing manuals as the most sure and certain haunt of fish.

I jumped into the water and had only swum some twenty yards when a young lad came down to the river. He sat down on the grass and began to unlace his shoes.

‘I guess there are some big fish here,’ I said, when the lad swam up to me. ‘Quantities of them!’

‘Oh no, not a single fish. Kolchugino lies higher up, all the fish have been suffocated.’

We dressed together. It appeared that the lad was the village club leader and was called Volodya Sakharov.

‘I hear that you are interested in everything,’ he said. ‘Come and look at the vaults.’

‘What vaults?’

‘Real family vaults, belonging to the counts Apraksin and Princes Vorontsov.’

In the grass of the churchyard human bones were lying about and sometimes came under our feet—fragments of a cranium, thigh or pelvis. Overturned memorial slabs could be seen here and there in the tall grass. I managed to make out some faded and earth-covered inscriptions: 'Major Andrew Alexeevich Kuzmin-Karavaev, Marshal of the Nobility of Vladimir province. From 1797-1802 . . .' 'Count Nicholas Petrovich Apraksin, Councillor of State . . .' 'Prince Constantine Fedorovich Golitsyn, remember him, Lord, when you come to your kingdom . . .'

'And here,' explained Volodya Sakharov, when we came out again into the sunlight, 'stood a monument to Prince Vorontsov, and there were rumours that there was a vault too under the monument, and that Field-marshal Vorontsov was in the vault with a golden sword. Our village people did not think of investigating, or perhaps they did not dare; but some cinema mechanics who came here were bold enough. At night-time they began to dig and they came upon some brickwork and an iron door with locks on it. They broke the locks, of course, and opened up a way into the darkness. The reports were right. Field-marshal Vorontsov did lie in the vault. There remained his epaulettes, boots with long, narrow toes, and his sword, but alas, it was steel. Then a militiaman arrived. He carried off the epaulettes and sword, but he left the boots lying around. The village children tried them on their own feet. So you see what history there is in our Karavaevo,' Volodya concluded. 'But in Mitin, a village close by, they began to dig up the stump of a tree, and among the roots they found a cask of wine.'

'Did they drink it?'

'Of course they did. Why pour it away? There was a land-owner's estate there in Mitin, now it is a hospital. Not long ago the former estate steward turned up and asked to be taken on as manager. "I have grown attached to this neighbourhood," he says, "my youth was spent here and I shall die here." He was not taken on. He travelled down four times from Moscow, but they would not have him. They suspected that he knew where some treasure was hidden in the ground; after all he was familiar with every nook and cranny. He was a crafty old fellow, it seems. He thought he would be installed as store-keeper and get the treasure.'

'Perhaps he really was drawn back to the scenes of his youth?'

'Even if he were, the scenes of his youth are very far away, not in the Soviet Union at all. Of course he could have been taken on as store-keeper, but to our eyes he seemed like an apparition, a ghost from another world. We have only read in books by Turgenev about such stewards. And now here one appears before us! What would he have done amongst us, living people of the present day? In my opinion, they did quite right not to take him on.'

While we were concerned with vaults and various archaeological matters, the morning came to an end. Volodya took me to the club to show me the archives of the village library, which had been founded in 1898. I had to read some yellowed accounts, where all the expenses of the library were entered down to the last copeck.

Volodya showed me lists of the books which were added to the library month by month; there was fiction as well as political literature, but most of all there were treatises on agriculture, which, incidentally, are little read in the country.

'Your library has grown, of course, since that time?'

'I should say so! When you look through these accounts, various thoughts come into your head. They were poor in comparison with us today, that is true, but poverty is not the most important difference. What do you think is the most important difference between their old library and our new one?'

'Well, you have more books . . .'

'There are more books, of course, but that is not the essential difference, that is just chance. Their library might have been more extensive.'

'The books were different. After all there have been plenty of new books written since then.'

'You're not seeing the point,' Volodya said with a laugh, taking pleasure in mystifying us. 'Those are not the essential differences.'

'What are they then?'

'Mainly in the purpose for which our library exists—the readers. Who was a reader in the old library? Five or six out of the whole village, not more. The sexton, the priest's wife, the parish clerk, and the landowner's daughters—that is all.

All the rest were illiterate, they had no use for books. But now our readers are everyone in the village, young and old. An old woman, or an old man with white hair and spectacles on nose comes in and asks for the latest volume. "Haven't you got anything by Bernard Shaw, who writes all about life in England?" So you give him a book by Shaw, and off he goes. That is the main difference,' Volodya said smiling, well pleased. 'We have so many readers, and they are not the same ones as before. And it's the same no doubt throughout the whole country, in all the libraries.'

In the meantime an interesting conversation was going on in the house where we were staying. The mistress of the house, a woman of fifty-six with a tired, unhappy face that seemed to have hardened into unhappiness, was telling her story. She had had three children: the eldest daughter, who would now have been thirty-three, had died during the war; the younger daughter was a forestry expert and lived in Volzhsk; her son worked in the Donbass.

Rosa asked her whether she had a husband, and who the man was who had been sitting in the kitchen the previous day. I too had noticed this man. He had been sitting on a bench with his elbows on his knees, smoking shag. His thin face with hollows in the temples and cheeks looked sticky and tubercular. The impression was increased by the damp strands of hair, which clung to his skull. He was about sixty years of age.

'I don't know what to call him,' the woman sighed dejectedly. 'He was my husband and we lived happily for thirty-six years. Then he turned stupid and got entangled with a girl from a neighbouring village.'

'A young girl?'

'The same age as our first daughter—twenty-three. For five years he just hung about, now he would go to her, then come back to me. Now for the last two years he has gone off with her entirely. He was attracted by her youth, I suppose. But I don't understand her, what can she see in him, she a young and healthy woman?'

'Had he come to visit you yesterday?'

'He lodges with me now. He lives with her, but he works here in Karavaevo. He is the baker and can't be replaced. He asked me for lodging, and I did not refuse, curse him!'

We were astonished by such a turn of events. Love and family dramas are very various, and no two are the same. But for a husband in the thirty-eighth year of wedlock to be turned into a paying lodger—that is a very extraordinary state of affairs.

We found Alexis Stepanovich Glinkin in the kolkhoz offices, a two-storied stone building.

‘Oh yes, if your companion has gone lame, we can help.’ And he immediately gave orders to harness a horse.

The kolkhoz office was clean and tidy, quite unlike the ones at Golovino and Zhary. We had not travelled far from Zhary, but what a big difference.

‘Our affairs are not going badly,’ the chairman agreed. ‘That is to say, we have no occasion to boast, but we are developing. You can say that the building work has been completed—sheep-fold, piggery, granary, vegetable-store, cattle-yard. Wireless has been installed throughout the kolkhoz, and in five out of six villages it is already functioning. But the amalgamation of kolkhozes did us a bad turn, it must be admitted. People were carried away and did the job without discrimination. Let’s make giant kolkhozes! Now it turns out that our land is divided in two by the river Peksha. This is such an inconvenience that we may have to divide up again. Well, we pay advances to the workers punctually, of course. Two roubles for each work unit. The kolkhoz workers have livened up, they are beginning to repair and improve their houses.’

A kolkhoznik approached the chairman and said that the horse was harnessed and we could set off. Two lads about twelve years of age came with us as drivers, one called Kolya, the other Nicholas. They were both of the same height, and both were fair-haired, bright and intelligent. We suspected that neither of them was very sure of the way and both were anxious in case they took the strangers in the wrong direction.

‘The main thing is not to get to Troitsa,’ Kolya whispered. ‘If we go through Troitsa it will be twice as far.’

‘We won’t,’ Nicholas whispered back. ‘If we keep to the right, we shan’t find ourselves at Troista. Whoa! Let’s spread some grass, so that it will be softer.’

The boys went off into the bushes and came back with two heaps of juicy grass mingled with flowers, which they spread over the floor of the cart.

‘Settle yourselves comfortably,’ Kolya invited us hospitably.

We proceeded slowly. When we came to a hill, where it was harder for the horse, I jumped down from the cart and followed slowly on foot. Kolya and Nicholas exchanged glances and also slid down from the cart. They whispered together; evidently they had not expected such behaviour from a man from the city, and were now correcting their joint opinion of him. How were they to know that I knew how to follow the plough before they were born. Thus we travelled on, in the cart over level ground, uphill on foot, downhill at a jogtrot, whereupon Nicholas would whirl the end of the string reins above his head and shout encouragement. The horse trotted on and twitched its ears in some perplexity. Clearly it could not recall a similar situation in the whole of its life.

We left behind a grove of ancient oaks and the ruins of a church, said to have been built by Ivan the Terrible, when he marched against Kazan. Soon afterwards we drove into a real kolkhoz forest. Here everything was such a tangle that it would have been impossible to make one’s way through it without an axe. Nor were the trees of a respectable size; most of them were merely aspen. It was apparent that between every two trees a struggle to the death was being carried on, and in fact this was not simply a forest, but a field of battle, where the fighting did not cease by day nor night.

The road was becoming narrower all the time, and now we had to draw our legs up into the cart, or we should be scratched and squeezed between the side of it and some aspen, which was rotting as it stood.

The farther we drove along this narrow and close-set road, along which no one could have travelled before us during the previous two months, the more anxiously Kolya and Nicholas whispered together. Snatches of their conversation reached our ears.

‘It must bring us out somewhere.’

‘If only we don’t find ourselves at Troitsa!’

‘Well, even if it’s Troitsa—at least it’s a village!’

The road led downhill, and the ground beneath the wheels grew moist. Far ahead of us there was a glimmer of light and Kolya and Nicholas cheered up.

A river of flowers and grass 200 metres wide cut across the

forest. We drove up and halted at its bank. There was no sign of a road in the grass.

'Never mind, there will be a road again the other side,' Nicholas whispered to Kolya. 'We only have to get across.'

An obstacle in our way was a ditch, filled with liquid mud, which divided the forest from the river of flowers. Three logs floated in the ditch. I tried to step on one of them, and it began to sink down in the slime. The sharp points of two broken logs stuck up from the mud, and if the horse slithered it could easily get impaled; in any case it could very easily break a leg. Our functions were distributed as follows: I led the horse by the bridle, Kolya directed us, Nicholas gave encouragement with the switch, and Rosa watched from a safe distance. The horse resisted and sat down on its haunches, whereupon its head came right out of the collar.

'Get out of the way!' One of the boys, I didn't know which, suddenly shouted in an imperious, gruff voice.

Instinctively obeying its commanding tone, I started to the side, and at the same moment I saw an iron-shod hoof flash past on a level with my face and only a few inches distant from it. The horse, like a wild animal, had leaped across the ditch. I was pushed aside by the shaft and the cart rattled past. It showed more than a boy's experience to foresee this leap of the horse and to give such quick warning of it. Meanwhile the horse stood quietly in the meadow with grasses and flowers up to its belly.

Forest and meadow flowers were strangely mingled together here, and all were blossoming and humming with bees, hiding the road from us. Kolya and Nicholas went off in different directions to search for cart-tracks. Their flaxen heads appeared and then vanished again among the tall grasses. But there were no tracks to be found, so we set off in zigzags over the flowery meadow. The horse was stubborn and moved unwillingly, so that we had to urge her on with the whip as well as tug at the bridle.

Then Nicholas had an idea.

'We must go back to where we started and leave it to the horse. If she has been here even once before, she'll know the way.'

This is what we did. The horse set off much more readily, not

to the right, where we had been trying to force her, but to the left, and after crossing a damp, squelchy strip, brought us out on to a cart-track. Nicholas was triumphant, and so were we all. It may be beautiful to be lost among flowers, but it is still better not to be lost.

We came to a good, smooth road, and Kolya and Nicholas exchanged increasingly anxious glances. They were obviously discouraged and did not even whisper as at first: 'If only we don't find ourselves at Troitsa!'

A village came in sight. At the first house we asked an old woman its name.

'Troitsa, my dears. This is Troitsa.'

'Is it far to Dubky?'

'What shall I say to you? The devil and Taras were measuring, and their string broke. One said: "Let's join it," and the other said: "Let's guess it". Drive on and you'll get there.'

All I remember of Troitsa is that some girls with plates of biscuits ran across the road. We were told that there was a home for the aged here, and that the old people were having their midday snack.



On the right was a wide field of purple lupins. The earth was cracked and a thick layer of dust lay on the road. When we were driving into Dubky, we came to the hard road which links Vladimir with Kolchugino, and a lorry which hurtled past raised such a dust-screen that we had to shut our mouths tightly so as not to have grit between our teeth.

Dubky stands on a hill. It was good to look back from here. Forest stretched away to the horizon, black in the foreground,

blue in the distance, and misty where the eye could no longer follow. Here and there whiteish, smoky wisps of fires and bright green glimpses of meadows showed among the blackness of the forest. It was pleasant to look back at these forests and recall that the invisible, winding thread of the path by which we had come lay among them.

We took up position by the side of the road and began to wait for a passing car to take us to Kolchugino, which was not more than twelve kilometres distant. Kolya and Nicholas set off home. We wanted to give them ten roubles each to buy gingerbread cakes, but they refused the money and even seemed affronted at the suggestion.

‘See that you don’t get lost again. Evening is coming on,’ we counselled them.

‘Oh no, now we shall go straight for Troitsa . . .’

A lorry picked us up three hours later, when evening was drawing on. The lorry was full of people, chiefly women; some sat on the floor on their bundles, others rode standing up and clinging to each other. The lorry had been carrying bricks and a thick layer of brick dust lay on the floor. When the lorry bumped, it rose up and covered the vehicle in a red cloud. The people too became red. When we jumped down at the outskirts of Kolchugino, we had to take everything out of the rucksack and shake it, and as for our clothes, there is no need to speak. The red brick dust was in our hair, our ears, our noses.

I had an Aunt Vera, my father’s sister, who lived in her own house in Kolchugino, and for some time we deliberated whether to stay with her or in the hotel. We were embarrassed by the feeling that we were crowding people and giving trouble—even though in this case they were relatives.

In the hotel the girl at the reception-desk told us outright: ‘There is not a single free room. If you like, I can give you an address. Some residents of Kolchugino take in lodgers, and we keep in touch with them.’ She wrote down an address and gave it to me. When I got into the street, I read the address which I had known since childhood. Evidently Aunt Vera also took in lodgers.

Pushing open a wicket gate, we passed from the dusty road into a quiet, cool little garden. On the steps of a crooked, wooden house stood a thin, elderly woman, hanging out some

washing on a line. When she saw us, she dropped the garments and threw up her hands. We did not tell her, naturally, that we had already been to the hotel.



The Sixth, Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Days

No one could give us a reasonable explanation why a copper-smelting works had at some time been set up precisely here (in those days a most remote spot deep in the forest, from which it was an impossibly lengthy journey to the nearest copper-mines). Perhaps the chief reason was the abundance of wood for fuel, or maybe the first industrialist was no fool and calculated correctly that in this remote forest district there would be no lack of workers, and they would be cheap.

However that may have been, some decades ago a yellow, stinking, poisonous smoke began to drift over the forest, such as could not come from the burning of rotting wood, pine-needles, last year's leaves or weeds. A tavern was built together with the first copper-smelting oven (where the Palace of Culture now stands), and the copper-smelting business got under way.

One of the clear recollections of my childhood is the yellow glow which appeared above the distant forests, especially on dark nights. That is Kolchugino, people said, a big factory and a big town. But to me, who had been brought up on fairy-tales, it meant only one thing: the firebirds were flying together from all directions to peck at Ivanushka's amber-coloured wheat. That was why the sky was bright above the black fir forest.

At the entrance to the works our permits were carefully scrutinised and compared with our passports, and we began to walk round the different shops. The first was the foundry. It seemed to us, coming in from the blinding midday sunlight, that it was in semi-darkness. In this murk there were sudden flashes and blazes of red, green and blue flame. The alarming sounds of cranes moving overhead, a hissing, a whistling, and, as it seemed, a loud sighing of machines made up the music of this workshop. A stream of metal came pouring out into a long mould. The inner walls of the mould were greased, and this grease was now burning with a red flame and quivering

green tongues of fire licked at the metal itself. That is where the variegated flashes came from.

A young woman with a long, pale face and a white blouse under her black working overalls acted as our guide. This was Nina Grigorievna Yakovleva, deputy foreman of the shop, a native of Voronezh, who had finished her training at the Non-Ferrous Metals Institute in Moscow eleven years ago.

Nina Grigorievna gave dry and business-like explanations. She did her best, and it was plain that she wanted to tell us in as lively a manner as she could, but not all specialists have the knack of simple exposition to the uninformed, nor on the other hand do all those who have this knack also have an adequate knowledge of their subject.

Various articles are made of the alloys which are produced in Kolchugino and other such plants. In the course of a few minutes we saw how a long, thin pipe is formed from a red-hot metal strip. It flows from the mill red and translucent and, as it cools, it becomes the usual yellow brass pipe. From one mill the pipe flows in a tiny stream, from another it pours like a waterfall. Into such a pipe one can later insert one's whole head. Over there a copper rod, not a pipe, is flowing from the mill, and there is a fine bronze ribbon, spiralling.

Here in the foundry I recalled how we had been walking through half-deserted villages.

'Where are all the people?'

'In Kolchugino.'

'Where has everybody gone?'

'To Kolchugino.'

A fair-haired youth was sitting above a tank of acid, his cheek propped on his hand, pensive as though he were sitting by a quiet pool with water-lilies. A bronze ribbon flowed past the youth into the tank. For some reason it has to be immersed in acid.

'Have you been working here long?'

'Since '46.'

'Where do you come from?'

'From the village of Novoselky, quite close by.'

Other workers came from various neighbouring villages. All without exception came from these villages. It is absolutely true that the towns are magnets.

From several conversations we learnt that what attracts people to town life is mainly the certainty of the earnings; it may be only five hundred roubles, but they know for sure that they will receive that. But in the country you may work for a whole year, and it is not certain what you will receive at the end of it.

‘Things have changed now,’ I said to them. ‘Monthly advances are being paid, two roubles on some farms, or five, or even ten.’

‘We had heard rumours of it. If things are like that, of course we would go back. But otherwise, why work for nothing?’

Having surveyed pipes of various calibres, and a number of rods and ribbons, the purpose of which was not altogether clear to us, we suddenly came into a world of familiar and intelligible articles. We were surrounded on all sides by wash-basins, tea-kettles, saucepans, frying-pans, sauce and ice-cream holders, and also the famous silver forks, spoons, knives and glass-holders, which are sold in jewellery shops, not in hardware departments.

The strip of silver is put beneath a percussion weight of two hundred and seventy tons, and a shaped spoon, even with a design on it, is formed straightway. But the spoon is not yet beautiful, there is further work to be done on it. It will be burnished, polished and silvered, until in one part it gleams like a mirror, and in another part it is dull and lustreless with a black tint like old silver. Until recently the polishing was done by hand, nowadays women sit beside the machines. A disk with thick, cloth edges revolves swiftly and evenly. You have only to place the metal beneath it, apply the necessary pressure and the work is done. For glass-holders they take a long strip with the design stamped on it, roll it into a ring and weld it. Then this too is burnished, polished and silvered.

The brigade leader proudly enumerated to us the huge quantity of articles turned out, whereat we commented:

‘Yes, your range is big, but the designs are very monotonous. That is noticeable in the shops as well. Once you get the design of the Three Warriors, you continue it for several years. Or a Kremlin tower. You stamp identical designs on cheap aluminium ware and on fine silver. Is that right?’

Here Rosa could not refrain from interjecting a truly feminine comparison, saying that one should not have the same colouring both for calico, for example, and for *crêpe-de-Chine*.

Suddenly, almost without noticing it, we found ourselves walking under the roof of another works with the name of 'Electric Cable'. There was a pungent and suffocating smell of hot rubber, and we saw immense pieces of rubber dough, black, red and yellow, lying about everywhere, surrounding us on all sides and moving in various directions. Dozens of machines were kneading and pulling the rubber, filtering it between hot rollers, rolling it out like noodles, stretching it, steaming it, cutting it into pieces and baking it again.

Of course it is all a matter of getting accustomed to it, but we could not stay to marvel at this for long, for the smell of the rubber is very oppressive.

We had scarcely ceased wondering at the skilful treatment of the rubber, when we saw something completely novel—hundreds of machines were producing wire. The material (metal rod) disappears swiftly and without interruption into a machine and is drawn out from the other end in the required form. It goes into the machine round and comes out square; it goes in square and comes out round; it goes in square and comes out rectangular; it goes in thick and comes out thin; it goes in in its ordinary form and comes out wrapped in rubber; it goes in wrapped in rubber and comes out interwoven with threads; it goes in in its ordinary state and comes out wrapped in paper; it goes in wrapped in paper and comes out tarred; several fine wires go in and a thick plait comes out; a bare plait goes in and something wrapped in a lead pipe comes out; in this lead pipe there are no more nor less than seven hundred interwoven wires. Hundreds of machines are working continuously. Hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of kilometres of all possible kinds of wires, flexes and cables come out. These are then installed in human habitations, they are stretched between them through the air, they connect them under the ground and under the water, even if these habitations are at different ends of the earth. When you next have a piece of flex or cable, disentangle it and perhaps you will discover a fine orange thread. If so, you will know that your flex or cable has been made in the town of Kolchugino,

for an orange thread is the mark of the Kolchugino works.

But the greatest marvel was still to come. We went into a workshop, which was more spacious and clean than all the others. Girls in white overalls moved sedately among the machines. It appeared to us as though the machines were working to no purpose. They made a pretence of drawing out a wire, but in fact they were not drawing out anything. Hans Andersen's weavers in the tale of the naked king worked in a similar fashion; they too made a pretence of weaving, cutting, sewing and measuring.

Suddenly in the machine nearest to us, just where the wire ought to be drawn in, if in fact it were being fed into the machine, we saw the faintest possible glimmer, as if a ray of sunlight had lit up a cobweb hidden in the shadow of a fir-tree. Yes, now our eyes could just make out that something imperceptible, practically invisible, was moving through the machine, glimmering now and again.

'But that is finer than a hair, how do you draw it out?'

'Hair! A hair is coarse string compared with our wire. It is not difficult to draw it out, but we weave with it too!'

Meanwhile, as we walked round the huge workshop, the noise of the looms was increasing. The material woven from these incredible threads was visible, tangible, indeed strong. Now quite golden, now silver, it shimmered beautifully in the light.

'I would like a blouse made of that!' said my companion.

'You could have one, but it would cost you a lot.'

'What is the purpose of it, who needs it?'

'Our factory has more than nine hundred customers, we could not name them all.'

But how is it possible to produce a wire, by comparison with which a human hair is like coarse string? We were shown how it is done.

A diamond, the size of a match-head is taken, flattened on two sides, then dropped into an electrolytic solution, and a needle is brought against it. An electric spark begins to pass from the needle, like a constant miniature lightning-flash; after twelve hours this has produced a tiny little hole in the diamond, and it is through this hole that the wire is drawn. They contrive to polish the inner walls of the hole, which can

only be seen through a microscope, with diamond powder. Seventy-two hours have to be spent in the preparation of a single little diamond. We saw long rows of polishing machines and long rows of incessant blue lightning flashes in electrolytic baths.

On coming out from the factory we could not resist having a rest in a cool, green little courtyard below the windows of the factory office. All the benches were empty and we sat down on the first one we came to, but after a few minutes we were joined by an old man, puffing away at a pipe. The very fact that he chose to sit down next to other people, not on an empty seat at a distance, indicated that he was a sociable person. The old man was clearly looking for someone to talk to, and he initiated the conversation.

'I always come here,' the stem of his pipe made a slight movement in the direction of the factory building. 'I no longer have any work here, but I come just the same. I sit for a bit in front of the works, then I go back home. I feel as though I had been at work. I get bored at home. Habit . . .'

'You're on a pension.'

'Yes, I'm a pensioner.'

Our conversation was halting, until a small incident gave it a new turn. A group of workers passed through the yard.

'There go the workers to take your place! So you can rest with your pension at ease.'

'To take my place! If they are to replace an old man, they need to do a bit more study. But they've finished with that. Everything is made so easy for them nowadays, it makes me quite angry. If things were made a bit more difficult for them, it would be better.'

'Why should things be made more difficult? In my opinion, the more easily a trade is learned the better.'

'How about character though? You spoke just now of workers to take my place. In the workshop, perhaps, they may do, but as regards character I am not so sure. Does that lad over there in the new uniform know how I learned my trade? Tell him that one has to struggle to make one's way in life, and he'll just laugh. Why struggle, he will say, if it's all quite easy: after seven years' schooling, you can go on to a technical school, and after that go into industry—that is one possibility; or have ten

years at a secondary school, then go to an institute; or go to a trade school. All these are well-known, sure ways of training, and they all lead to the same goal. At the present time the difficulty is not how to find a job, but where to go and what to choose, which institute, trade school or technical school to select. Certainly life is not very hard if the only difficulty is how to choose. But if I were to tell him how I got my training, he would not believe me, he'd say that it was all fairy-tales.'

'Why don't you tell us?'

'It would take a long time to tell the story of my life. I could write a whole book.'

'Tell us about the early days, the very beginning of your life.'

The old man fell into thought. His pipe went out. He cleaned it with a match, filled it and began smoking again. Then he broke into a laugh at some recollection of the past.

'I am thinking of our first strike. That was a jest! Since then I have taken part in real strikes, but I remember the first one best of all. I'll tell you about that, if you have the patience to listen.'

The old man told his story in a lively fashion, becoming excited and living again his early experiences. Every so often his pipe went out. His story was full of lively scenes and vivid details, so that I have not had to add to it or alter his own words.

'At that time we were living in a small town near St. Petersburg,' he began. 'My father worked as a chef in the capital, and my mother was in domestic service. I was the oldest of three brothers, and I had three sisters. It was my lot to leave the shelter of the family roof first. There was no industry in our small town except small handicrafts—mending pails, samovars and saucepans. But my father planned to make a real metal-worker of me.'

'One evening I ran home from a fishing expedition (I remember that I had caught a couple of tench), and found Uncle Moisei, a house-painter, sitting and talking with my mother.'

'“I'll take him there, of course,” Uncle Moisei was saying.'

'My mother turned to me.'

'“Tomorrow you are going to Petersburg to your father; see that you don't get lost on the way, keep close to Moisei Prokhorovich, and take care when you get to Petersburg!”'

‘My father was a very religious man. His first act was to take me to a service in the Chapel of Christ the Saviour. I stood there with a candle, while a requiem was sung for my childhood, which though poor was a time of freedom. Then my father gave me two days’ holiday.

“‘Then I will take you to your place of work.’”

‘We stopped at no. 28 Troitskaya Street, a two-storied, wooden house; it is still there today. My father pulled a wire and a bell sounded in the depths of the house. While we waited, I read the sign: Karponovsky Metal Workshop.

‘The owner himself opened the door, a round-shouldered old man of sixty, with a big grey beard, small eyes, and a large, reddish-blue nose. I had already come to know what causes such noses, since my father’s nose was a bit red, and not as a result of his prostrations in church. The mistress of the house emerged behind him, small, plump, with her hair still in disorder, although it was already midday.

‘I understand now that Karponovsky’s business was coming to an end. Stein’s factory, producing surgical instruments, had been set up, and a small workshop which made the same articles could not stand the competition. At the time when I began there, Karponovsky refused nothing: sharpening knives and scissors, chromium-plating of samovars—he accepted anything. He had not a single adult worker, only apprentices. I was to be the sixth.

“‘This is how it is to be,” Karponovsky dictated to my father. “Your boy cannot leave me before three years are up. His wage is eleven copecks a day, which he will receive in food, not cash. He’ll go to the baths twice a month. To the town on Sunday for four hours.”

‘Then he took us to see the bedroom. This was a room without a single window, in fact it was an attic rather than a room. There were six beds close together, with no space between. From the bedroom he led us to the workshop. I stood there, surrounded by its five inhabitants, whose natural curiosity was aroused by the appearance of a new boy. My master and my father went off to celebrate the bargain.

‘The new boy was accepted well, there were no malicious jokes or tricks. I felt that I had come into the company of old friends. At first they all seemed alike to me, but later each one

acquired his own particular character. Only one of the lads stood out from the rest at the first glance, Nikishka, a well-made, fair-haired youth from Ryazan; he was the oldest and the most authoritative. Evidently he was responsible for the friendly, family atmosphere, which prevailed in the workshop.

'In the evenings, after twelve hours' work, we used to lie on our beds and swap stories. By degrees I learned the character of each, and their relations to one another.

'Nikishka, as I had correctly guessed from the start, was our leader. He was not afraid of our master and mistress, because he was valued by them; he had skilful fingers and was the mainstay of the work. It was he who hooked out a ruff from our fish-soup, placed it on a chair, and before the eyes of our mistress whipped it with a piece of string, saying: "That's punishment for you for eating all the smelt in the dish!" After that we began to have smelt in our soup.

'The next in age was Yashka, just as lusty a lad as Nikishka, but without the gaiety and humour, the easy attitude to life, which were shown in every word and movement of Nikishka. Yashka was anxious to improve himself, he read many books and went about wrapped in thought. He tried to tell us about Lev Tolstoy and his teachings all the time, and we laughed at him for this, but it did not make him angry.

"If you're not careful, you'll die of inflammation of the brain," Nikishka prophesied.

'Leshka, a weakly lad with smooth, scanty hair, was the son of a lackey. Once we found a half-eaten cake under his pillow. He had no possibility of either buying or stealing it; consequently our mistress must have given it to him. In return for what? What service had he done? We realised that Leshka must have been telling tales.

'The fact was that sometimes, unknown to our employers, we obtained a small job of work—mending a kettle, sharpening knives and so on. Naturally we kept the money which we had earned in secret. Leshka had been informing about this.

"We have to punish him," one of our company suggested.

"We can't strike a fellow-being!" Yashka objected, being well versed in Tolstoy's teaching of non-resistance to evil.

"No, we won't hit him," Nikishka agreed. "We'll boycott

him. No one is to speak a single word to him. That will make him howl!"

'Leshka did howl on the second night. I was woken by loud sobs from my neighbour's bed. The others too all woke up, and Leshka gave us his word that there would be no more tale-telling.

'The father of one of my comrades, Vaska, worked in a railway workshop. Vaska was the only one of us who belonged to the real working class, for it is one thing to be a chef or domestic servant and quite another to be a railway worker. This was the start of the whole affair.

'We lived in our own little isolated world, and we should have known nothing of any outside disturbances, had it not been for this Vaska. His father brought news home from the railway depot, and from there it came to Vaska and so to us.

'The end was that one day we decided that we too must act. Were we to lag behind the Russian proletariat? Were we too not the proletariat? We must act, but how?

'Yashka made a characteristic suggestion: we must educate ourselves, become cultured people, otherwise it would be impossible to govern the state.

'None of us, to tell the truth, had any intention of governing the state, nevertheless we began to educate ourselves. We obtained some cheap booklets on various improving subjects. Among all these booklets we came across pamphlets about Nat Pinkerton. We became so absorbed in these that we could not be dragged away from them.

'The next thing that we thought of organising was a mutual aid fund. This idea too was brought by Vaska. Such a fund strengthened the solidarity of the working class. So be it. We began to contribute five copecks each every month to the fund, and elected Nikishka as treasurer. However, he did not justify our confidence. He was subject to a fatal passion for billiards, and he lost our whole sum of sixty copecks on the game.

'By degrees the affair took a serious turn. One evening when we had all gone to bed, but were not yet asleep, the most interesting hour of our lives, the time of absorbing tales and intimate conversation, Vaska suddenly put a seemingly innocent question to Nikishka.

"What have you been working on today?"

““Only trifles. There was no proper work today. I had to sharpen scissors.”

““How many did you sharpen?”

““About thirty. Why do you want to know?”

““And what is the price of sharpening one pair of scissors?”

““Fifteen copecks.”

““So you have earned four roubles fifty copecks. You’re rich, my boy!”

“Nikishka even sat up in bed.

““What are you talking about?”

““A simple calculation. Multiply fifteen by thirty and you get four fifty. Yesterday I repaired some sort of surgical instrument and made a whole five roubles.”

““What are you getting at? What’s come over you?”

““Why, the thought that our employer is robbing us. We each earn for him about five roubles a day and he allows us eleven copecks, and not even that in cash—his old woman drinks half of it. As for our grub, you know what that’s like. The leavings from the table go into the mincer, and there’s the meat-hash for us. Why do we eat hash every day? Just because we are fed on the leavings.”

““It’s quite true, what Vaska says.”

““We don’t often go to the baths either.”

““And what right has he to stop us going to the town after work? We’re not in prison, are we?”

““We sleep in an attic without windows, we suffocate without air.”

“We had all forgotten about sleep. We went on whispering till the dawn, excited, wrathful as if intoxicated, anger seething in our breasts.

““It’s all very well to talk, but what can we do?”

““What do the workers at big factories do? We must go on strike!”

““Strike? What sort of a strike would it be, when there are only six of us?”

““What would be wrong with it? And it’s just the right moment. The old man has just received an urgent and profitable order, and he is very anxious to carry it out. If we refuse to work, he will do anything for us. If we miss this opportunity, it will get worse and worse for us.”

““What shall we demand?”

““We must think about that.”

‘After half an hour we had written down our demands, consisting of four points, with a stub of pencil on a scrap of paper. Our demands were as follows: permission to go to the baths four times a month, part of our wages to be paid in cash, freedom to go where we wished after work, and a whole day off on Sunday.

‘We had three hours left for sleep. In the morning we got up, looked at one another, but did not dare to back down. All the same we were afraid. We were only boys after all; we were not afraid of the police or of prison, just of our own fathers.

‘A new question then arose: when should we begin our strike—before breakfast or after? Vaska, as the most consistent proletarian, voted for no breakfast, by which we should demonstrate our strength of character, but the majority of us disagreed, deciding that it would be easier to go on strike on a full stomach.

‘The clock struck seven, the hour for beginning work, but we did not stir. We had shivers down our spines. The maid-servant looked into the workshop.

““Lads, it’s time to start work.”

““Go and tell the master that we refuse to work. Let him come and enter into negotiations.”

‘Adele looked at us in alarm and ran off. The mistress appeared in the doorway, but we would not talk with her either.

““Call the master, Cyril Ivanovich!”

‘The master came running in in his underwear. His voice was hoarse from drink, his eyes were red.

““What’s this, mutiny? You young devils! I’ll send you packing to Siberia!”

‘I had been entrusted with the job of handing the master our demands. Accordingly I went up to him and said:

““We are not mutinous, we simply want you to carry out the demands written on this paper.”

““See here, I didn’t bargain with you, but with your fathers. I’ll have a talk with them. Fetch your fathers here.”

‘There were only two of us whose fathers were in the city—mine and Vaska’s. We went off to fetch them. They reacted differently. My father pondered for a moment, then said:

““You shouldn’t have done it, my son. If you were hungry, you should have told me and I would have helped you.”

'I was angry then with my own father.

"That's not the point. You might have given me food, but what about Nikishka and Vaska and Yashka and Kolka Sarkis and Leshka? We're all in this together."

"All right, I'll come."

Vaska's father, on the other hand, heard of the strike with approval and delight.

"Good lads! So he isn't prepared to carry out your demands? The scoundrel! Very well, we'll look into it."

'Our fathers soon made their appearance.

"And he is an unbeliever," my employer complained to my father. "He cut off a piece of copper from the icon of Nicholas the Miracle-Worker and used it for a soldering job."

'My employer calculated rightly. My father turned purple, his beard quivered, and his fist was aimed at the side of my head before I could manage to raise my arm in defence.

"On your knees before your employer!"

"Hit me if you like," I answered calmly, "but I won't go on my knees to him."

'When I went into the workshop, I saw all my friends behind the door, watching to see if I should give way or show strength of character.

'In the end our employer accepted all our conditions. Imagine our delight in such a victory! It was then for the first time that I felt myself a human being.'

The old pensioner had forgotten about his pipe, which had long been out.

'So that's how it was. For the first time I felt myself a man, whereas you simply inherit this feeling. And you say: why make things more difficult? So that people should realise that things were not always as they are now. People did not always go along a highroad, but in days past they had to struggle through the dark towards a distant light, which they did not yet see; it was only their faith that it existed and that it would certainly dawn one day!'

So that is how the working class was formed, that was its university. Village lads came to work for employers such as that Karponovsky—the Nikishkas, Yashkas, Vaskas,—they were frightened by the city, they did not know their way around it, and then followed the factory, a strike, and the very

foundations of the autocratic state were shaken. For it appeared that Michael Leontievich, who had been talking to us, had taken part in the storming of the Winter Palace.

A procession of people passed through the yard where we sat. A new shift was coming on.

We had now to regard our acquaintance with the factories of Kolchugino as at an end, or else we should have to remain there for a year or two years, to study them thoroughly in all their details. One extra day would add nothing. However, I remembered the bitter reply of Volodya Sakharov, when we were bathing together in the Peksha below the village of Kara-vaevo: 'There is not a single fish! Kolchugino lies upstream, and all the fish have been suffocated.'

I initiated a discussion on this subject in the industrial and transport section of the district committee. I inquired what became of the acid in the tank, over which the lad from Novoselky had been pensively sitting.

The answer was brief: 'Into the Peksha.'

'But this acid is a poisonous substance. It must have some injurious effect?'

'Effect?' Poskrebin laughed. 'I can't water my own vegetable garden. Everything dies—cabbage, carrots, onions. It is not only the fish, but even the infusoria cannot survive. Some effect! The very territory of the works is infected. The rain-water flows into the river and carries with it oil and God knows what else! We are taking measures, of course. We have achieved something, we release acid into the Peksha not more than five times in the year. That is a big achievement.'

'Wouldn't it be better if there were filters?'

'Yes, we are constructing filters. Certainly the work is being inefficiently done and has been dragging on for a long time, three years or so. We'll get the precise facts.'

Poskrebin took up the receiver and asked to be connected with the head of the construction works. In a minute some interesting figures were in our hands. The factory had received two million roubles from the state for the construction of filters, of which it had spent only seventeen thousand. Evidently they had the money but not the will. Of course if the factory did not carry out its obligations according to the plan, there would be recriminations—someone might even lose his job. But if the

filters were not made, no great harm would be done, no inquiries would be made, no one would notice. The fish would disappear? People would fall ill because of the water? Well, in the first place, it is never certain what is the cause of people's falling ill. Our job is production according to the plan.

I was anxious to visit the spot where the water from the factory flows into the Peksha and where the construction of the filters was alleged to have been begun, but Poskrebin restrained me.

'There's nothing to see. Black, dead earth, evil-smelling black water. Once we have made the filters, then you will be able to drink the factory water again.'

'There is also the question of smoke,' Poskrebin continued. 'At the present time it is not noticeable. But if you come here in winter, you will see that the snow is black as soot. Zinc oxide is dispersed into the air from the foundry. That is harmful. We used to have a tall brick chimney, which lifted the fumes high into the sky where the wind scattered them, and the town had comparatively clean air. In the thirties it was decided to break down the chimney. This was done, and instead of it they put up a low iron chimney, and the town began to be smoked like a ham hung over a fire. Not long ago the construction of a new chimney was begun, that is, one such as we had before. We are building it on the old foundations. When it is finished, the town will be able to take deep breaths once again. We are putting in gas-absorbers. Ours will be a health-resort, no ordinary town. We also intend to absorb the zinc oxide, which will go to the lacquer-paint industry.'

It was pleasant to listen to such good plans. It was only a pity that they referred to some unspecified future time.

We had seen so much forest on our way to Kolchugino that we wanted to make the acquaintance of the people who have the task of preserving, maintaining and enlarging the forests.

If you go into a forestry station, you feel immediately that you have come into a special world, with its own special interests. Posters hang on the walls with drawings of various tree pests — caterpillars and beetles. In one station instead of posters there were the pests themselves, killed and fixed on to cardboard and placed under glass. Here there were also thin cross-sections of various kinds of trees. In the corner of the director's office there may be a horse-yoke or a cart-wheel, on the table a huge tree-

fungus. The picture may be completed by a handful of selected acorns, scattered on the window-sill. If you add to this some elk-horns fixed to the wall, then you have a typical forestry station.

The Kolchugino foresters were affable people. The director of the station, Michael Alexeevich Krivoshein, a stout, grey-haired man, introduced us to a younger forester, who happened to be in the office. He was a tall, swarthy person, with side whiskers and hair falling low on his brow, from behind which he peered as if from a cover or screen of fir branches. Most of our talk was with him.

‘Let’s take the bull by the horns,’ this forester said and lowered his head, retiring still farther into his ambush. ‘There are two organisations: the forestry station and the timber-felling station. It might seem that the difference between them is small, just in the name, but if you think that, you do not understand at all. These organisations are as far apart as the sky from the earth. In the first place, one of them, the timber-felling station, is concerned with the destruction of forests, while the other is concerned with their cultivation. However, that is not the whole trouble. One of them has an abundance of first-class equipment—mobile power-stations, tractors, bulldozers, mechanical saws, motors. It is a well equipped army, destined to attack and invade. More than this, the workers have high wages, special awards, permits to holiday resorts, medals, titles of heroes, they are written of in the press, they appear on the cinema screen, their names are read on the radio. In short, one organisation is privileged, the other is neglected. No, we don’t ask for glory, but take the forestry inspector here, for example.’ We noticed a quiet, elderly man, sitting in the corner of the office. ‘Since 1919 he has been watching ceaselessly over millions of acres of state forest, that is to say, milliards of roubles. Does he get a word of thanks!’

‘Of course the felling of a tree is a more effective sight than the cultivation of young saplings. A mighty tree sways and falls crashing to the ground with a great rush of air. The wood-cutter sets his foot on the vanquished giant, and feels like a giant himself. Just the subject for a picture. But we dig in the ground, we sprinkle various dusts to ward off cockchafers, we wage war against caterpillars. What glory is there in a war against caterpillars! Last year they attacked the foliage of a young

plantation. Throughout the day our women worked in the heat, feeling along each branch and crushing those caterpillars in their hands, which became steeped in green slime up to the wrist. And how much did those women earn? Three roubles a day—and all because they had gone to work for an organisation with the title 'Forestry Station'. That is the normal rate of pay. But how much timber did they save?

'Then take the wood-cutter. We too have wood-cutters, although we are wood-cultivators. They fell trees for the whole of the day, but without mechanical aids. One would suppose that there would be equal pay for equal work, but it is not so. While the wood-cutter of a timber-felling station earns good money, our wood-cutter has not the right to earn more than nine roubles a day. That is how the forestry station is valued. And what of the foresters, that army of devoted watchmen and labourers, living in numerous forest lodges? They are isolated from other people, they work from three in the morning until eleven at night. There may be six or seven in the family and they earn two hundred and twenty roubles a month. How is such a wage calculated? Or is it assumed that the forester is a rogue and will steal in any case, or do they reckon that he can cultivate his own small-holding and get profit from that? But the fact is that he is not a rogue, and if he works on his small-holding, he will neglect the forest.

'We have been talking of the forester, now take me—a forestry expert. He is the last link in the chain, or, if you like, the first, while I am a forest engineer, a man with education, a specialist. And I am compelled to sit all day in an office, to look through papers, to busy myself with the most boring and unnecessary documents, which spring up like mushrooms out of the mistrust which man has towards his fellows.

'The time comes to pay wages. "You have plenty of timber," I am told. "Cut down some trees, sell the timber and pay the wages out of the proceeds." So an axe is put in the hand of the man whose function is to maintain the forest. In my left hand I have a brand, in my right hand—an axe. Thus I go through our forests. The axe must be taken from my hand!' the forester almost shouted.

'How about our forests in general, are they diminishing or increasing year by year?'

‘We are over-felling by 30 per cent,’ the director answered. ‘It means that if a hundred trees are left to grow up, we cut down one hundred and thirty. Accordingly there is a trend towards exhaustion. And now we have suddenly had a directive to cut down in the formerly most strictly protected moisture-preservation zones. Along every river for several kilometres from each bank the forest has been inviolable. Such a decree was enacted right back in Lenin’s day. From the present year we are to make inroads here too.’

‘You must excuse our bitterness,’ the young forester broke in again with a smile. ‘We, forest cultivators, are in conflict with the whole world, from the industrialist right down to the herd of cattle. You say that livestock must be increased, and for us that is a scourge, because cattle are driven to pasture in our forests. You say of the elk: “What a good, peaceful creature!” But I say to you that he is an enemy of the forest because he destroys the young plantations. There is a rising scale in destructiveness: the cockchafer eats the roots of the young trees under the ground; the elk eats the branches; the goat tears off the bark; and man comes along and wrenches out the whole tree, branches, bark and roots together. Besides that he sets fire to the grass and knocks down the nesting-boxes for the starlings and tits, which we set up. So we feel bitter with you all. But it is because we love the forests, and understand better than others that, if they are utterly destroyed, man’s life will be hard. That is why we are fanatical and bitter . . .’

For four days we had been immersed in town life and had been entirely cut off from the countryside and nature. When we came to Kolchugino, the first camomile had been flowering. What now? Had there been many changes in these four days?

Looking intently around us, trying to observe every grass and flower, we returned to the life of the earth. One thing was plain: during these days the heat had continued its terrible drying activity, drinking up perhaps the last drops of moisture.

A light car overtook us and braked sharply. The long trail of dust which followed behind when the car was moving swiftly now enveloped us, and the sun was dimmed and turned orange. When the dust dispersed, we saw the secretary of the Kolchugino district whom we had met during the past few days.

‘Why couldn’t you ask for help? Why did you have to run

off on foot?' he said reproachfully. 'Get in, we are going in the same direction.'

The Secretary was a man in his early forties, with reddish hair, a red face, like all fair people, and small light eyes. An aquiline nose gave his face and his whole appearance a stubborn, yet at the same time a bewildered countryish expression. His name was Alexander Andreevich Lobov. There was another man with him in the car, who had a grey moustache and such a worn briefcase that it was soft as a rag.

This man proved to be an official from an agricultural department. He tried to peer out at the fields through the windows which were shut on account of the dust, and Lobov said impatiently:

'Don't bother to do that, when we get to the Krasnaya Niva kolkhoz, you will see everything at once. We can hold out for another week,' he continued seriously, 'but if we do not get rain after another week, everything will die. Look there!' He angrily let the window down with a rush, and a blazing, scorching blast of air burst into the car.

We soon came to the village of Ilinskoye. This was our objective, for here we should come to the old Stromynka road, along which the terrible Russian Tsar travelled to the monasteries of Suzdal. The secretary and the agricultural official were on their way to the fields of the kolkhoz Krasnaya Niva, where the official would see with his own eyes how everything in the fields was being dried up.

The kolkhoz chairman, Sergei Efimovich Vanyatkin, was in no mood for visitors. As we drove up to the office, we could see that something was afoot. Women with bundles were crowding together, children were scurrying around, a youth was setting benches in the back of a lorry. There were even more people inside the building, but all the bustle could not obscure the cleanliness, the good order, and a kind of well-cared-for solidity in everything that met our eyes. Vanyatkin, a round, plump man with a cheerful face, was lost in the crowd, and even Lobov himself was unable to detach him and draw him into his own cool and spacious room for some little time.

'Well!' Vanyatkin growled angrily. 'You kept shouting: "Festival for Stock-breeders, District Rally of Stock-breeders!"' So we hung out our placards with the names of people worthy

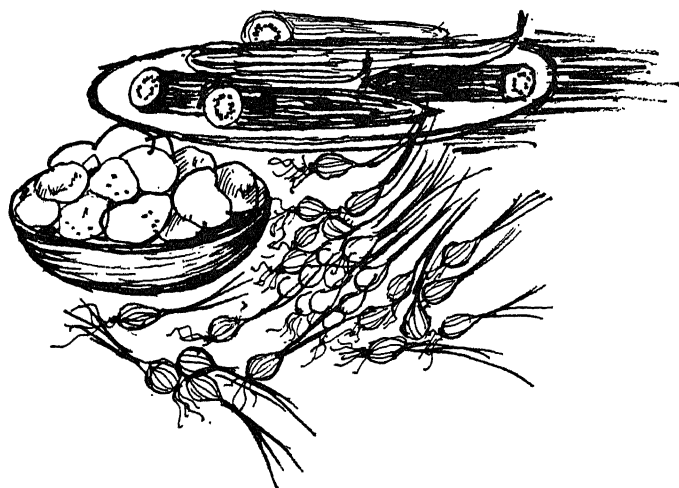
to go. The women made themselves new dresses, bought new kerchiefs. Then all of a sudden, on the very day before—it's off! The Stock-breeders' Day is postponed. It was a great disappointment for our people, I can tell you.'

'Where are they off to now?' the secretary inquired.

'Where are they going?' Vanyatkin looked sidelong at Lobov to see if he would approve. 'I decided to send them to Moscow to the Agricultural Exhibition. I have given them all a hundred roubles, a lorry and twenty-four hours' leave. Let them go and have a look round, they've deserved it. Each cow has given nine hundred litres more milk this year.'

Subsequently we tried for a long time to discover why the Stock-breeders' Day had been postponed. There were rumours that there had been a hitch in the fulfilment of the plan for agriculture, and it was felt that it was no time for festivals.

The leading stock-breeders, that is to say, the women who had gathered in front of the kolkhoz office, took their seats in the lorry, and it disappeared round the corner. The road immediately became quiet and empty. Vanyatkin led us along the village street, and we soon came to a roomy cottage. It remained a mystery when the chairman could have given his instructions, for we had not left his side for a moment. On the table there was a dish of cucumbers, a dish of potatoes and a heap of juicy, spring onions. In the country it is customary to

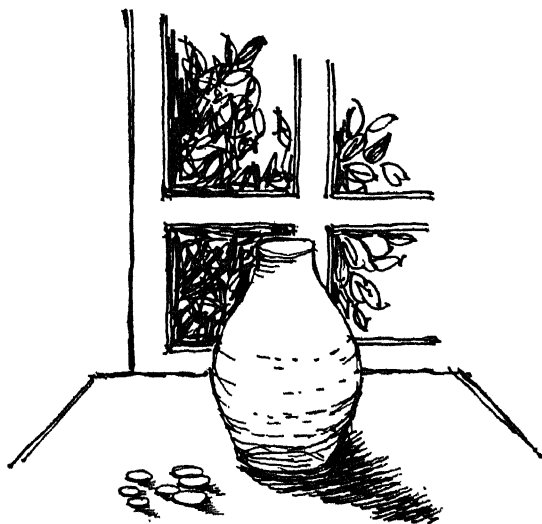


keep the bottles on the floor and bring them out one by one as required. In the place where one might have expected to see wine-glasses, the sort of glasses which are used for tea glittered ominously in the gathering twilight.

Both the secretary of the district committee and the kolkhoz chairman were due to leave that same evening for a two-day conference in Vladimir. As they were leaving, they told us to be sure to await their return. 'Two days won't upset your plans, you'll feel yourselves quite at home here, and then we will take you to Yuriev by car in thirty minutes!'

The Tenth Day

I woke up because I was thirsty. A whiteish half-light filled the cottage. Snores came from behind the partition—emanating, no doubt, from the somewhat deaf old woman who had made the beds in the evening. The lilac bushes in the garden and the fig-plants within the room kept the early morning light from penetrating through the windows. The windows were closed. We ourselves had closed them in the evening to keep out the mosquitoes. Thirst helped me to recall the previous evening better than anything. The table had been cleared of glasses, cucumbers and onions. A big jar stood on a white cloth in the middle of the table. It held milk. Rosa and I took turns and drank it to the bottom. The snores from behind the partition increased in volume. It was clear that we should not get any more sleep. We exchanged glances, and each read the same resolution in the eyes of the other. I put money for the milk and the night's lodging on the table. Then we crept through the inner room on tiptoe, through the passage at a rapid pace, and down the steps from the porch at a run.



The morning blazed like a goblet of golden wine, which has trapped a ray of sunlight. The immense, stilled world was soundless—grey cottages in the foreground, forests wrapped in mists—beyond, and in the distance—the dawn. The forest lay in a valley, and evidently a river ran through it; this could be the only explanation of the great zigzag of milky fog inscribed on the blackness of the forest. Far away the cross of a small church rose up from the mist.

Yesterday we had not inquired the way, so now we went by guesswork through the village. The last building was a hospital. Such was the hush in the world that involuntarily one thought: 'Surely at this moment even there all are asleep, even if some have been tossing and screaming with pain all the night long.'

The Stromynka began just beyond the village. It was a level, wide strip, which at one time had been worn smooth by swift troikas and carriages, and which now was flat and grass-grown. The edges of the strip on either hand were bright with pinks. A wheel-track wound through the wide strip of green, clearly visible, though not deep enough to show the dusty ground; in the same way a clear strip of water makes its way in the centre of a stream overgrown with water-lilies.

Along the edges of the Stromynka there were trees here and there, some singly, others in groups, in places there was low, green scrub. The country all around was like the steppe. A camp-fire, left by shepherds, was smoking at some two kilometres from the road; the crack of a herdsman's whip came from a coppice. Smoke from the fire drifted across the road, fragrant like the smoke from a fire of dried dung.

Sometimes this whole stretch of the Stromynka—the banks and ditches of the edges, the level green strip, the worn track—began to wind and make gentle bends, and these curves made the wide morning scene even more beautiful. We walked lightly and gladly—because we had decided to make our escape and not stay for two days in Ilinskoye, and because it was impossible to miss our way along such a track as the Stromynka, and simply because the air was fresh, the sun shone kindly, and we were still sufficiently young to be untroubled by thoughts of the transitoriness of the world.

I almost trod upon a horse-shoe, which looked quite new, with fragments of bent nails in rectangular holes. It was huge and

heavy. Only the mighty steed of Ilya Muromets or some other champion of the past could lose such a shoe—such was the view of my companion, and I did not attempt to convince her that most likely it had been cast by one of the Vladimir cart-horse breed. I stowed it away in my rucksack, and I still keep it as a souvenir of that happiness which came upon us on the Stromynka road.

Meanwhile a dense thicket of alder suddenly confronted us and blocked the Stromynka. For some time we tried to keep our direction and struggle through the thicket, hoping that it would soon come to an end, and that a wide expanse with the broad road traversing it would open before us again. But the alder was joined by birch, mountain ash and wild cherry, and raspberry and spindle bushes made such a tangle, that no course remained for us but to return to the spot where the trees began.

Having retraced our steps we saw that we had a choice of two ways: a faint path led to the right downhill to marshy ground; a distinct tractor track bent round to the left.

There was not much logic in our decision to follow the tractor, since we had no idea of its destination or purpose. But its track was very distinct by comparison with the path, and this deceived us. In places the tractor had forced its way between the trees, knocking against their trunks, stripping the bark and splitting the top layers of the wood. He was a clever tractor-driver, and manœuvred skilfully, luring us deeper and deeper into the forest. Before long we realised that we were not on the right path, but we had gone too far to turn back and begin all over again.

The tractor led us not to a village, not to open country, not to a forester's lodge, not even to another track. The grey firs, with lichen drooping from them like long beards, thinned out and a huge battlefield appeared before us, or to be more exact, a massacre of trees by men. The tractor track made loops and circles in the clearing. Birch logs lay in piles here and there, ready to be carted away. Scraggy little trees stood in a few places, looking like orphans. The top of one surviving birch had been broken as a neighbour fell, and hung by a thin piece of bark, dried and black, while the rest of the tree was green, and was even murmuring in the morning breeze. A big iron stove was lying overturned on its side at the edge of the clearing,

showing that the trees had been felled during the winter. The stumps, chips and broken branches would have produced a more melancholy impression, if the clearing had not already been overgrown with willowherb. We walked slowly round the edge of the whole clearing, and did not find a single path leading away from it.

Wanderers who are lost in a forest climb up a tall tree and from there spy out the land. In books the situation is described thus: 'He gazed in vain into the cloudy distance. The forest ocean stretched to the very horizon, endlessly.'

The clearing was in a hollow, and I really should have slid down from the tree without discerning anything except forest, had not the bright, sunny green of open country been just visible in a distant gap between the black crests of the firs. We now began to break a way without any path through the forest, our only concern being to keep our direction. The damp ground squelched under our feet, fallen twigs snapped, and our arms were covered with scratches. But the light became increasingly bright, and when the last trees were left behind a meadow carpet was magically spread before us, rising up a small hillock. Mauve smoke drifted up from the chimneys of a hamlet on the summit. A bigger village was to be seen to the right on a more distant hill. We heard men's voices coming from a thicket close by, and we made our way towards them in order to get more precise details of the neighbourhood. A stream trickled through the thicket, sometimes spreading out into little pools.



Four men were wading through one of the pools with a net. The net was not so much soaked with water, as stained with bluish muddy silt.

‘Can there really be fish here?’

‘I was walking along the stream yesterday evening,’ one of the fishermen said, ‘and there I saw him, the devil!’

‘What did you see?’

‘A pike, what else! So we came here early this morning. Look there at thirteen small pike we have caught.’

Some puny young pike lay on the grass.

‘If there are pike, there must be other fish!’

‘No, there is no sign of any others.’

‘Then what do the pike feed on?’

‘Mostly on mice.’

We did not know whether the fisherman were laughing at us or talking seriously. ‘The meadows around are full of mice, and if one falls into the water, that’s the end of him.’

‘It may be a long wait before he falls in.’

‘You’d wait, if you’ve nothing else to feed on. See how small they are.’

The hamlet on the hill was called Fedorovka, the larger village on the hill—Kliny. We set off towards Kliny along the edge of a field of peas.

When Cinderella woke in the morning in her garret, the glittering ball in the royal palace seemed a dream. She would not have believed in that dream had it not been for the golden slipper under her pillow.

A sailor, who has returned to tilling the soil in some forest region, will still keep a fragment of coral, and perhaps in his old age, when the cloudy depths of southern seas begin to seem like a distant dream, only this coral will remind him that the oceans are still pounding on the beaches today.

When we emerged into the bright fields, the tangle of the forest seemed like a delusion, a dream. The coming forth into the open country was like an awakening, and only a small bunch of forest flowers, which Rosa held—winter-green—cool and silvery, and so unlike the flowers of the meadows—assured us of the existence of the forest through which we had just come.

At the outskirts of the village mist was wreathing lazily over

a pond, cumulus clouds and rushes were reflected in its surface. Willows rose in green masses from the ground, more luxuriant than the clouds. These were huge, ancient trees. The wood deep within them was rotten, but they still had the strength to draw up the sap from the earth and raise it high up under the sky. One willow had fallen into the pond, and it was possible to walk along it. It was diminished by the big pond and had lost its proud grandeur; its top reached only to the spot where the rushes ended and the clear water began. Young green shoots had grown up from the prostrate rotten trunk, like the spray which was scattered when the willow crashed down.

Firm plank bridges with handrails led from the bank to a depth where it was no longer possible to see the bottom, although I have never seen a pond with such clear, translucent water. However, this did not interfere with all manner of insect life.

A creature with legs and whiskers, like a wood-louse, crawls along a stem under the water. This is a water-louse, the peaceful consumer of all decaying matter. Here comes a marvellous creature, a pond-snail, with its whorls downwards, skimming along below the surface of the water, which is like the ceiling for it. Meanwhile a black, streamlined little projectile is detached from the black depths and shoots upwards. It can now be clearly seen that this is the tiger of the jungle below water—the water-beetle. Now it will protrude the tip of its belly above the water, breathe and take in air, and again shoot down to the bottom. Just as a small bloodthirsty sable attacks a musk-deer, fastening its teeth into the back of its neck, so the water-tiger hurls itself at a fish, which is huge in comparison with itself, and sometimes overcomes it. If it does not manage to do so alone, the smell of blood will collect an army of its fellows, and then the fish is torn to pieces.

If you sit a little longer, you will see a large, shadowy form suddenly rise up from the murky depths—a gigantic water-scorpion. He too needs to breathe the air.

If you have the patience and the good luck, perhaps you will catch a glimpse also of a wonderful spider, which constructs a house for itself under the water of bubbles of air. There is no need to speak of the leeches, which scurry and wriggle, little black, velvet threads, striking horror into the breasts of bathers such as my companion.

Bluish-black whirligig beetles roll and slide over the pond like little balls of mercury, poured on to glass. Pond-skaters dance on the springy surface of the water like circus acrobats on a rubber mat.

We established our camp on a wooden platform, and set about bathing and washing our clothes. The water was fresh and cool, shimmering with gold deep down, shot through by the morning sun.

Gradually the village woke up. Four men went towards two mowing-machines, which stood at a little distance, without haste lighted cigarettes, and with still less haste began to poke about in the engines.

A woman with a basket came down to the pond and began to rinse her linen. She told us that the pond had become quite overgrown, but that last year it had been cleaned out and deepened. 'Our pond has been rejuvenated,' the woman said.

Two little girls and a chubby small boy, all three of them fair-haired and blue-eyed, climbed along the fallen willow and began to play a game. This ended with the small boy falling into the water, whereupon he was instructed to sit on the bank and dry himself.

The day had begun. We put our things together and moved off to the village.

Three disasters had befallen the chairman of the Kliny kolkhoz, Noshin, on that day. Firstly, a weighty sow in farrow was drowned in a pool of mire. Secondly, a delegation arrived from the neighbouring kolkhoz, Frolov. These two farms were in rivalry with each other, and the delegation had arrived to see what Noshin had achieved. And since his affairs were going badly as compared with the Frolov kolkhoz (the drowning of the sow, the loss of two month-old piglets, the filth in the cattle-yard), the arrival of the delegation was a misfortune. We heard the Frolov kolkhozniks berating Noshin, and he stood blushing before them, like a schoolboy before his teacher. Thirdly, as the culmination of all these disasters, some travellers turned up from nowhere, requiring to be told about everything.

Noshin was unshaven, he wore a blue shirt and black trousers, made of cloth almost thick enough for an overcoat. These practically cast-iron trousers, which had evidently been put on to impress the delegation, and which had the bottoms

rolled up so as not to raise the dust, for some reason aroused in me a feeling of some pity for their owner. We decided not to worry him any more and went off to an old park of lime-trees, to rest during the heat of the day.

When you are lying in the cool, all kinds of random thoughts come into your head. For example, the question suddenly presented itself: which is the more remote—the village of Kliny situated some two hundred kilometres from Moscow, or a settlement far off in the Polar regions, on the shore of the Kara sea. We were sitting once in such a settlement, cut off from the rest of the world, waiting for a plane to take us to Bolshaya Zemlya. Ten days passed, each of the ten seeming like a month, because when you are listening from morning to night for the metallic noise of an aircraft to penetrate through the howling of the blizzard, time stands still. And then it came—the sound of engines! We all rushed to the airstrip to meet these unknown people, who had flown to this settlement. And down the gangway of the plane calmly came Misha Shorokhodov, my good friend and fellow-student at the institute, and the proverb which states that the world is small was proved true in a striking manner.

Then we had a drink, and Misha, who beheld the sea for the first time in his life, kept straining to run away from me into the green surge and the ice-floes, and I kept grasping him by the skirts of his overcoat and dragging him back on to dry land.

So it was that in a settlement lost in the Polar regions two journalists, who were acquainted with one another, met and were not unduly surprised at the encounter; anything may happen!

But was it possible that two journalists should also meet in the village of Kliny? No, that was completely unimaginable. Accordingly one might draw the conclusion that Kliny was more remote than a settlement in the Arctic.

It would be difficult now, probably, to find any spot on earth where the foot of man has not trodden. But there are plenty of places not trodden by the foot of a press correspondent! From this point of view we were now making our way through virgin, primaeval country. We journeyed as explorers, and everything that came our way—from a branch of flowering

bilberry to the chairman of a kolkhoz, from the ravaged tomb of a Field-marshal to the increase in milk yields, from the Kolchugino orange thread to the tadpoles in the Kliny pond — everything was of concern to us.

The lime-tree park in which we were resting was gradually going to ruin. The trees were growing old and falling. But in the centre of the park the lime-trees stood in a close ring, and little stalls were set up there, and the grass was trodden down by evening dances. Long narrow alleys led away from the centre, in which it was almost dark. The people of Kliny could not be blamed for the ruin of the park, because it would have been impossible to restore it. Newly planted young trees would not survive in the dense shade of the patriarchs. Thickets of elder and acacia surrounded the park in an almost impenetrable ring.

It is said that the village of Kliny was the estate of the Romanov boyars, from whom came the dynasty of the Russian Tsars, and the first Russian Tsar, Michael Romanov, was supposed to have been born actually in Kliny. On the way out from the village a little church has been preserved; it began to be demolished, but a halt was made and the white wall now bears the customary inscription: 'Architectural Monument. Protected by Law.'

'You will go the whole way through avenues. Through avenues all the way to Yuriev,' a grey-bearded old man pointed us to the familiar Stromynka.

We walked on for a long time over the parched earth, remembering the words of the Kolchugino secretary: 'We can hold out for another week, but after that—I don't know.' It was stifling, as before a thunderstorm. Far, far away on the horizon there was a slight darkening in the sky, and from time to time there was a low rumbling. Was help coming from that quarter? Perhaps over there the rain was already pouring down.

A momentary feeling of annoyance (because the storm was there and not here) was replaced by gladness: it wasn't America over there, after all! They were the same Russian cornlands. Pour down, rain, where you will! Russia is vast—you cannot miss it.

As we approached Yuriev-Polsky the rumbling grew more

distinct. Help was on the way to secretary Lobov, there was a cannonade right round the horizon. In the night there would be a storm.

We saw the white churches of Yuriev silhouetted against the deepened blue of the sky, so that their whiteness seemed unnaturally bright. We stopped for a minute on a hill, from which the ancient, timbered town was spread before us in all its detail, as if laid out on the bottom of a deep, bright green dish.

The Eleventh Day

Yury Dolgoruky, like many Russian princes, liked to found cities at the meeting-place of two rivers, even though one of them might be quite small. Our own capital was set by Yury on a high promontory between the Moscow river and the Neglinka.

There are many beautiful and suitable sites along the Koloksha. One may say that the Koloksha and its water meadows are one of the main beauties of the Vladimir countryside. The water in it is crystal-clear, yet it seems dark from its quiet, assured depth. You will not see on the surface of it those wrinkles, eddies and whirls as on rivers with a swift current. The deep, bright water appears motionless, yet it flows! Meadow flowers look down into the Koloksha, unless the leaves of water-lilies are spread out near the banks. At midday in July wide-faced, crimson-scaled chub rise up, quantities of them, from the gloomy depths.

The whole of the Koloksha is beautiful, but Yury Dolgoruky stayed his glance just where the stream Gza falls into it.

I do not know precisely how it came about—whether he stamped his foot on the ground in this spot, proclaiming ‘Let a town be founded here’, or whether priests walked here with icons and prayers—however it may have been, the chronicler (the press-correspondent of that day) had the opportunity to write in his notebook: ‘Yury Dolgoruky established a town called by his name Yury, designated also Polsky, and built a church of stone in it dedicated to Saint George.’

Several princes lorded it in Yuriev, one after another, but then it passed into the estate of Moscow.

At the end of the nineteenth century, as is well known, Russia entered on the path of capital development. The town of Yuriev did not remain aside from this; a peasant Ksenophont began to make ploughs. He himself tested them in the ground, continually improved them, and his ploughs gained renown at that time.

This is the extent to which industry developed in the town of Yuriev-Polsky: Ksenophont's factory had two drilling-machines, five forges and one grindstone. Light industry, in particular weaving and dyeing, developed more successfully. We were to see much of interest in these factories.

Koloksha the beautiful flowed on, the clouds floated above Yuriev, time passed. Some houses were pulled down, others were built, but there was one building in the town which continued to stand in the form in which it had been constructed by Yury's craftsmen: 'And he built a church of stone dedicated to Saint George.'

Now as we roamed through Yuriev, among many churches and belfries, we tried to discover which was this cathedral.

Could it be that tall belfry, rising up like a watch-tower, dominating the town and its surroundings? Or perhaps it might be that handsome brick edifice of extravagant architectural forms? Or was it after all that white stone cube, standing on green grass and crowned by a simple onion dome and a cross?

The nearer we came to the 'cube', the more closely we looked at it, the more evident it became that this indeed was the cathedral. The severity of its lines, the absence of any flourishes and bagatelles which create a deceitful beauty, and finally the delicate stone carving on its outer walls, all indicated the unspoilt taste of the architects of the twelfth century.

At one time the church stood out sharply in its dazzling whiteness among the darkness of wooden hovels and palisades. Now that it is surrounded on all sides by big and elaborate churches, it still makes a sharp impression, but by reason of its simplicity and modesty—perhaps it stands out even more now than formerly among the wooden hovels.

In a handful of bright sea pebbles, you will not at first notice a modest little pearl, but the more closely you study it and compare it with the cheap splendour of the stones surrounding it, you will understand better why a pearl is a pearl!

Many scholars are in agreement that even if the church is not to have a glass cover over it, it should at least be preserved: for after all there is no Yury Dolgoruky to build a second!

None the less, one can say that the church of Saint George in Yuriev-Polsky is falling into ruin. One corner shows a crack

and will shortly fall. No work of restoration or strengthening is being undertaken, and it may be that we are the last generation which will see with our own eyes this real pearl, which has stood on the green bank of the Koloksha for eight hundred years.

This quiet little town, smothered in greenery, pleased us more and more, encircled as it was with all these camomiles, scabious, pinks, cornflowers . . . You look along a street and at the end of it you will see a ripening field of rye. Breezes, smelling of meadow flowers, blow through the town, and it seems as though the very wooden houses are permeated by these scents.

Together with the river, which flows through the very centre of Yuriev, water-lilies, dragonflies, heavy evening dews, river mist on summer nights, all form part of the lives of the townspeople.

Small boys, and not only small boys, sit with their rods beneath the shade of spreading willows. Bright grass grows between the houses and the river, as in the country.

The ancient market building in the centre has been preserved; this is a big, low structure of whitewashed brick, with wide windows set close to one another in a line, which are closed by brown wooden shutters with heavy iron bars across them. In front of this building a beam lies on posts, to which drivers tie their horses.

This has been a town of oats and leather, hay and wheel grease, flour-dealers and bast bags.

The storm which had been approaching so certainly did not reach Yuriev. However, the next morning the over-heated town was sprinkled with some big, sparse drops, and there was a smell of horses, not strong but persistent, throughout the town—a subtle mingling of hay, tar, halters and manure.

At midday we set off for the museum. This has its quarters in a monastery, and we had to go through the grassy inner courtyard. The grass had now mostly been mown and lay in heaps. In the far corner a girl in a light dress and a broad-brimmed panama hat was turning over these heaps. She came up to us. Her round face was sunburnt in spite of her big, shady hat, her eyes were the lazy blue of the sky at midday. She had a smell of fresh hay. This was Rosa Philippova, a

worker at the museum. She quickly exchanged her hay-rake for a pointer, and led us round the cool, damp-smelling rooms of the museum. We learned many interesting facts here, chiefly about places adjoining Yuriev. Since we are to visit all these places, it will be better to tell of each of these as we come to them.

Rosa Philippova shared our regrets about the cathedral. All the letters which she and the director had written were returned to the district authorities for them to investigate and take action, and for the time being they were doing nothing about it. 'It will fall down, then they will take notice,' Rosa concluded.

From the museum we went on to inspect the weaving factory. Apart from our natural curiosity, we had an additional interest which had been aroused only that morning while I was having a shave at the barber's. Presenting my cheek to the soapy brush, I listened to the conversations proceeding in the other chairs. My neighbour, a dark-haired young man, was conducting a curious dialogue with the girl barber.

'Yesterday all the frogs in the Koloksha jumped out on to the bank.'

The girl giggled.

'Why did they suddenly do that?'

'Well, yesterday the factory again emptied all its water into the river, so this is the situation: foul water runs in and the frogs jump out on to the banks, as if someone had thrown them out in handfuls. It's all up with the fish, of course, they can't leap out on to the bank.'

The weaving factory, which deafened us with the din of hundreds of looms, until recently had been producing tartan cloth, that checked material for shirts, beloved of geologists, tourists, rock-climbers, press correspondents, fishermen and all those in whom there beats the romantic pulse of the wanderer.

It was decided in Moscow that it was quite easy to switch from tartan to tapestry. Accordingly during the previous six months the factory in Yuriev-Polsky had become the biggest works in the country for the production of tapestry. New looms were installed—marvels of modern technology—and the people of Yuriev were told: 'You must learn to work them!'

The people of Yuriev did not hesitate; already in the first three months they produced six thousands metres of the new material. This is the kind of material which is used for the

covering of sofas, stools, ottomans, and also for curtains. The difference from ordinary materials is that in the one case the material has the colour added to it, in the other it is made from variegated threads. The methods of obtaining all these colours, designs and patterns were shown and explained at length to us, but it is such a complex process that one lesson was not enough.

‘We should like to enquire how the effluent is purified at the dye-works. Is that possible?’

‘Why not?’ The secretary offered us a horse, but we refused that and set off on foot to the dye-works.

The head of the water-purifying installations, a sunburnt, lean Ukrainian, Kalko by name, with the typical Ukrainian cunning in his eye, met us at the gates.

‘I am a plainspoken man, and I will speak plainly. We purify the water conscientiously, within the limits of our means. Of course, we need biofilters, but we still have not got them. Biofilters are a different matter entirely. With them it would be possible to drink the water, but we achieve the degree of transparency required by law, and that is all.’

‘What kind of transparency is that, and how do you achieve it?’

‘In a moment you will see for yourself. This is our water, as it is before treatment.’

We approached a gutter, along which water was pouring — black as ink, and giving off a pungent chemical odour.

‘These dregs flow into a subterranean reservoir, from which we pump it and simultaneously add substances to it, quicklime and vitriol.’

The thought occurred to me that these substances alone would be enough to infect the water and make it poisonous, but we listened to what was to follow.

‘This is the result,’ Kalko continued. ‘Under the influence of these substances all the blackness is concentrated into flakes.’

In fact we saw that the water had become somewhat lighter, approximately tea-coloured, with flakes of soot floating in it.

‘Now it is all very simple. There are several chambers and two ponds — reservoirs. The flakes sink to the bottom, and the water on top flows into the Gza, from the Gza into the Koloksha, from the Koloksha into the Klyazma, and — that’s the end of it.’

The reservoir, close by the works, looked like a mound of some black, semi-liquid substance, like the grounds left at the bottom of a coffee-pot. The mound had been piling up for several years. It appeared that since this system had been introduced, the reservoir had not once been cleaned. There was a squelching sound, and a bubble shot up with a gurgle from the bottom, but not of course a bubble from a fish poking about in the silt. There was no life at all for many metres around.

Two girls carrying glasses of brownish water met us.

'You see, they are taking it to the laboratory. There they will test it to see whether it is sufficiently transparent to be let into the river.'

'Yes, it's transparent enough,' the girls said. 'It has a transparency of eight centimetres.'

'That means that letters can be distinguished through eight centimetres of water,' Kalko explained. 'With eight centimetres the sanitary inspector cannot object, that is the legal transparency.'

'Let me have a drink,' I stretched out my hand to the glass.

'What are you thinking of!' The girl snatched away the glass. 'It is poison!'

'Yes, but it has eight centimetres of transparency!'

Everybody laughed.

'Our cleansing is a bit primitive,' Kalko concluded. 'But for the moment we have no other means of doing it. Biofilters, of course, are quite a different matter.'

'Tell me honestly, what would be the cost of installing biofilters?'

'The cost is well known. Filters can be installed in any factory for two million roubles.'

The inexperienced reader may be frightened by such a figure. All the same, when a factory is being built, the installation of filters at a cost of two millions is no different from building the front steps of a new house.

We were told of works and factories which are fined two million roubles every year for the pollution of rivers. It is a ridiculous situation: money is transferred from one account to another account, but this makes it no better for the fish in the river, nor for the people living near the river.

We know also of the two million already allocated by the state to the Kolchugino factory, of which only seventeen thousand have been spent until now.

We sleep, we busy ourselves with our affairs, and in the meantime both day and night hundreds of thousands of poisonous streams pour ceaselessly into our bright rivers and destroy all forms of life. Is it possible that this criminal disgrace should continue?

Perhaps it is not the factories which should be fined (because this simply means that the state is fining itself), but the directors. If they are made to feel it in their own pockets, they will soon take the matter in hand, and our rivers will be purer . . .

Dear, quiet little town of Yuriev-Polsky! There are few cars, no crowds in the streets, no rattle of trams. Live and enjoy your peace and quiet.

However, I have quite forgotten that to live in the centre of Yuriev-Polsky is really impossible. We encountered this melancholy fact on our first evening.

That marvel of modern technology, a huge loud-speaker, painted silver, raised aloft on the tallest building, was blaring forth. The transmission was carried on at such a pitch that no walls were capable of checking the pressure and the avalanche of sound. Every word, every shade of intonation in the broadcaster's voice were heard within the building just as clearly as if the loud-speaker were hanging in the room.

Culture, just like lack of culture, can manifest itself in various ways. If the sound is turned on in a small hall, restaurant or café, with a volume sufficient to fill a huge market-place, so that people sitting at the same table are unable to carry on a conversation, this shows a lack of culture, even though the sound emanates from a product of human civilisation—radio, and despite the fact that the waitress looks triumphantly at the visitors, as though to say: Look what we have got! The calculation evidently is that the louder the sound is, the more splendid it is. It is not realised that music, when it is relayed quietly so as not to interfere with conversation, not insistent, not like a jet from a hose-pipe, is more appropriate in a restaurant, just as a table-lamp is more suitable there than a dead blue strip of fluorescent lighting.

One can leave the restaurant, but where can one flee from

one's own house, if a hose-pipe, belching forth noise, is beating directly against one's windows!

At first we thought that the radio would boom on until eight o'clock. Then, gritting our teeth, we prolonged this period till ten, but the din went on till midnight, so that we were compelled to listen to a broadcast for agricultural workers, and a broadcast for miners (How many of them are there in Yuriev-Polsky!) and letters written to people's relatives in the Arctic, and a concert by the Pyanitsky Choir, and an operetta.

At last there was silence. One had the sensation as though for several hours one had been shaken, tossed up and down, crushed and squeezed, and then at last left in peace.

This blessedness did not last long. At six o'clock in the morning the inhabitants of Yuriev were invited to rise up with cheerfulness and perform their physical exercises. I even looked out of the window into the square to see if indeed people were running out and forming up in straight lines to do their drill.

Next the adult townsfolk were compelled to listen to a broadcast for young Pioneers—what idiocy! So it went on till the next midnight.

The head of the local broadcasting network (or his deputy), a round-faced, fair-haired man, beginning to go bald, wriggling uneasily on his chair (what could these people want?), clasped his hands on his stomach, assumed a carefree expression, and made ready to listen to us.

I began by narrating an incident which had befallen some Soviet tourists in a village in Slovenia. Their driver, wishing to gather together the tourists, who had strayed away, sounded his horn several times. Thereupon a policeman came up to the coach and demanded the payment of a fine: it was against the law to make a noise in the streets. It was only when he discovered that the tourists were Soviet citizens that the policeman relented, and the misunderstanding was cleared up.

'Well, in that respect we have more freedom here at the present time!' the director exclaimed gladly.

I also told him that there were plans for prohibiting the sounding of horns in the city of Moscow.

'As you see, people are struggling for quiet. Can you tell us who gave you a directive or instructions to broadcast so noisily for the whole of the day?'

'I don't really know . . . That's the way it is. This is not the first year that we have been broadcasting. The people must be educated. Or rather, the people themselves demand culture.'

'Probably people have facilities for listening in their own homes?'

'Of course, wireless has been installed throughout the town.'

'Then why have it in the street? Do you imagine that anyone is going to do gymnastics in the square at a quarter past six in the morning?' The director was amused by such a supposition. 'People's tastes vary,' we continued. 'One person likes operetta, another likes accordion playing. One cannot endure a symphony concert, while another puts his fingers in his ears if the Pyanitsky Choir is singing. Why do you impose all three on all of us? It is cruel—and uncultured!'

It appeared that the director had ceased to understand us; but we continued.

'Perhaps someone wants to read a book, to write poetry, compose music, or simply go to sleep. It is impossible for him to do it, for you deafen him and make it impossible for him to concentrate.'

At the words 'compose music', the director's pale-browed face became animated and he was on the point of breaking into laughter, but then he turned sour, and his whole appearance said: 'Go on, go on, talk as much rubbish as you want!'

'Probably there are sick people, who need quiet, and you disturb them.'

'That is so. There are such cases. There have been complaints, people have written letters.'

'No doubt there are children, whose mothers cannot get them to sleep, because of your trumpeting?'

'That does happen too. We have received some indications of it. But most people love the radio, they love cheerful music, it raises their spirits.'

We went out into the street to the strains of a march, hurtling round the town at a speed of three hundred and thirty metres a second. The sounds beat against the houses, changed direction, drummed upon the roofs, and rebounding were lost in the green expanse of the Koloksha water meadows.

In the evening of this day the inhabitants of Yuriev were startled at the sight of a passer-by of strange appearance. He

was tall and thin as a lath. He had a towel twisted like a turban on his head. Dense black stubble covered his face, suggesting that he could not have shaved for at least ten days. The sleeves of the black jacket, which he wore on his bare, sunburnt body, were rolled up above the elbow. The huge space between the jacket and the ground was filled by blue sateen trousers. He had nothing on his feet, for his shoes were tied to his rucksack.

If one looked closely at the dense black stubble, one could make out that this was quite a young man, with merry black eyes and full, red lips.

The inhabitants of Yuriev were baffled most of all by a wooden box, which the young man carried on a strap over his shoulder. Some supposed that he was a gipsy horse-doctor, others that he was a Serbian magician, others—a wandering photographer, and others—a juggler; they were baffled by the turban. But it really was not difficult to surmise that the box contained a quite ordinary artist's portfolio.

We met for supper in the cafe and talked like old friends. Sergei Kupriyanov (in the future we shall call him Serega) had also set out on a walking expedition. And since neither he nor we cared in which direction we went, we decided to join forces. So there became three of us.

Serega told us among other things that a thunderstorm with heavy rain had at last broken out at Kolchugino. The rain poured down on the thirsty kolkhoz fields, and incidentally the prosecutor's office in the town was struck and set on fire.

After blazing, exhausting days we entered on a period of refreshing storms and rain.

The Twelfth Day

In the cool of the morning we hardly noticed how we covered eighteen kilometres at a quick, cheerful pace. The sky, which hitherto had been either completely cloudless or covered with splendid golden clouds, suddenly now began to turn a deep blue, tinged with purple. The blue intensified, darkened and spread wider. Cool air blew from one quarter, where there was evidently a thunderstorm. We ourselves had not yet come into a single good downpour, but it was to be expected before long.

A wooden bridge was reflected in a stream, in which water-lilies and other water plants were growing. To the left of the bridge a quiet, green back-water led towards an ancient park. To the right a mill pool blazed in the sunlight. Serega opened up his folding easel, and began to paint the water, the water-lilies and a corner of the distant park. He was immediately surrounded by children, who breathing heavily and nudging one another, gazed to see what would come of it.

An aged man leaned his elbows on the railing and also stood watching; an artist at work interests everyone, not only children. Meanwhile Serega, wishing to be of use to his new travelling companions, and knowing what might interest us, interviewed this man on the subject of maize as he worked. The interview reached the stage when Serega very much wanted to know what the peasant thought about the subject, and the peasant was no less anxious to know what Serega thought about it.

'Then there are rooks,' the man side-tracked Serega. 'The rook has been interested in maize before our people. He doesn't miss the spot, he pecks just in the right place. And where he pecks, there will be a bare patch. I have heard that in one village the chairman took a gun and wanted to shoot all the rooks. He went to the churchyard, where they had their nests. But the women wouldn't allow it. They took his gun from him.'

A crowd was collecting. There are always a lot of people passing over a bridge.

'In one rest home the rooks prevented people from sleeping,' a youth in a sweater and a leather cap broke in. 'Well, of course, the people were in a nervy state. The director hired children to throw the nests together with the young birds down on the ground.'

'That's not right.'

'In America, they say, they bring wireless out on to the field of maize, and the rooks caw all day long. It's a warning to the rest.'

'Does maize grow in America too?'

'Yes, it does.'

'But it doesn't take well here.'

'Don't say that. Tobacco too at first, you remember, gave a very small crop. Everything is difficult at the beginning.'

Serega finished his sketch. As we walked, the earth again seemed to move slowly to meet us, and it was beautiful. A shaft of sunlight, piercing through a cloud, brought out of shadow a green meadow, level as a carpet. The meadow shone brightly and gaily, and seemed to make everything around brighter too. The river lay in several great loops on the meadow. It was strange that it could flow in such a level place. Some toylike cows wandered between the loops of the river. In the background of the picture was a hillock, bent into an arc, and overgrown with forest. This dark, shadowy forest framed the tender green of the bright field.

Some collective farm women were working in a field before the village. We tried to guess from a distance what they were doing—hoeing, watering? Their movements were unlike any that one would expect in field work here in the Vladimir countryside.

The village was called Glotov. In the Yuriev-Polsky museum we had been advised to be sure to go to this village, but we were not told why: you will see for yourselves, we were told, and if you do not see, you have no reason to be walking on the earth.

Now we walked slowly through the village, looking to right and left. We did not have to look long. It would be easier to go past a blazing campfire in the night-time without noticing it than to miss this.

Among trees and funeral crosses stood a little wooden

church, a survivor from the darkness of the ages, coming straight out of a fairy-tale. We had never before seen such architecture; it was exactly suited to a wooden church, not at all to a stone one. But for a wooden church it was the ideal, the perfection of form, developed through many centuries. Before us was not merely a church, but a work of art, a master-piece of wooden architecture.

Four mighty beams were placed in a square on the ground, their ends roughly hewn with an axe. The ends were joined in a cross, as is done in all wooden houses. On top of these were placed another four beams, but a little longer than the ones below, and the next ones were longer still. In this way the timbered structure of the church was built up, like an upturned, truncated pyramid. Each corner reminded one at a distance of a hen's foot, and for the first time we understood the meaning of the term 'a cottage on hen's legs.'

At more than a man's height the church was encircled by a narrow wooden gallery with carved pillars, under a narrow boarded roof. The boarded roof rose up above the gallery with two sharp-angled gables, the lower gable fitting into the gable above. The roof was so steep that it would be impossible to cling on to it. A brick but very light tower supported an onion-dome and a cross.

The greater part of the boarded roof was the colour of the yolk of a hard-boiled egg, it was so thickly coated with a small, dry lichen.

The roof over the gallery was in a bad state of preservation, and the remaining boards were also bright yellow. The steps leading up to the church were quite broken down.

As soon as Serega opened his sketchbook, children from the whole village gathered round. We asked them who could open up the church and show it to us. A little girl offered to run and call Aunt Masha Titova. 'She has all the keys, and just now she is planting tobacco.' (So that is what the women in the fields were doing.)

Aunt Masha, a healthy-looking woman of middle age, came running up, her hands smeared with good black earth. It took her some time to turn the key in the lock, for it must have weighed no less than three kilogrammes.

We were not particularly impressed by anything inside the

church—a Bible with silver covers, a dim icon-screen, ancient shutters on the windows. Aunt Masha said that if nothing were done, the church would last for another ten years or so, and then fall in ruins. Yet it was built in the seventeenth century.*

In Sweden there is an unusual museum; there is one too even nearer in Riga. A number of wooden structures are assembled in a park: a mill, a barn, a bath-house, houses of various styles, bridges. Do we really love our own past less than the Swedes and the Latvians, that we cannot make such a museum!

The autumn rains pour through the roof of the Glotov church which is eaten away by the yellow lichen. It is rotting as it stands, and when it rots away completely, there will be no other such church in the whole of Russia.

Of course this will not cause the death of anyone; but neither would it cause anyone's death, if the whole of the Tretyakov Gallery were to disappear. The Glotov church, removed from its isolated position to a more accessible site, could be the object of countless excursions and tourist expeditions. Built by nameless craftsmen, it has been built, as it were, by the people themselves, it is a part of our folk-lore, and we should treat it like folk-lore. A legend can be published in a big edition, but there is only one church, and we can only watch over it and protect it.

Aunt Masha told us that someone had taken an interest in the church and had even contributed some money for it, but what had happened to this money was not known to Aunt Masha, still less to us.

The children escorted us in a troop beyond the village and even into the fields. The last enthusiasts left us only when the first houses of a big village, with the charming feminine name of Sima, came in sight. There is nothing more tedious than walking through a long, straggling village. You think that you have reached your goal, but still you cannot quite come to it.

We got into the park without hindrance, but we did not manage to get near the big house itself, which was surrounded by a fence. The façade of white stone, looking on to the park, was simple, without columns or any unnecessary architectural decoration. Two stories with fifteen windows in each and three attic windows—that was the whole façade.

* The Glotov church has now been removed to Suzdal.

A man tried to stop us at the gate from going farther. But if we had been able to visit the factories at Kolchugino and Yuriev-Polsky, we were not to be turned away from a trade school of the distilling industry. Moreover, a guide appeared, willing to show us the formerly princely house.

In fact there was little to see within the house. We had hoped that one historic room in it would have been kept intact, but we were disappointed. Furthermore the guide had no idea which this room was, and heard from us for the first time that here, in this house, where he was now learning the rudiments of agriculture and distilling, Bagration had died in 1812, from his wounds on the battlefield of Borodino.

We went into the church where the famous commander had at first been buried, but no one could tell us where his tomb had been. Thus in the village of Sima nothing was added to the knowledge which we had on leaving Yuriev-Polsky, gained from the lips of Rosa Philippova and from the documents which she had shown us. In particular she had shown us a copper funeral slab, taken from the prince's first grave. This is the inscription written on it, word for word:

'Prince Peter Ivanovich Bagration, while staying with his friend, Prince Boris Andreevich Golitsyn, in Vladimir province, Yuriev district, in the village of Sima, received the most exalted command to be Commander-in-Chief of the Second Western Army, and set off from Sima to join it, and being wounded in the engagement at Borodino, came back again to Sima, where he died on September 11th.'

It remains only to add a few details of the last minutes of the hero of Borodino.

It was kept secret from Bagration that Moscow had been given up. While sick, he continued to send various instructions, and also queries as to the condition of his army. But there came no answer. Then he sent a trusty officer, Dokhturov, to find out the state of affairs. Dokhturov was not warned in time and he reported the whole truth to Bagration. The sick man in terrible wrath, his face convulsed with spiritual and bodily pain, leaped to his feet, one of which was rotting with gangrene. His death throes began and in a few minutes he was dead.

The ashes of the commander now rest in the field of Borodino, but a ray of Bagration's glory has fallen capriciously on an

obscure remote village in the depths of the Vladimir countryside, and has lighted it up for many, many generations, ridding it of its obscurity. Nothing can now change this. However many years pass, it will always be said and written that 'Bagration died in the village of Sima, twenty-three versts from the district town of Yuriev.'

The chairman of the Sima kolkhoz, Pavel Efimovich Kireev, a strong man of gipsy type, with somewhat slanting eyes, sat at his table, wearing a straw hat, which, considering the breadth of his face, might well have had a wider brim. Lenin's stern face looked down on him from an oval gilt frame. He seemed to be looking directly at the chairman's hands, and at what he was holding. This was a small piece of paper covered with large writing. Before the chairman sat several men holding axes, who were evidently carpenters.

'Very well, we'll sign an agreement. Come back in the evening.'

The carpenters whispered together.

'No, we'll wait now. We all want the same thing. We want an advance.'

'How much?'

'We're not sure . . .'

'Three and a half.'

The carpenters whispered together again.

'Too little. Feastdays are coming, Trinity, All Saints' Day.'

'Very well, we'll sign an agreement. But as for an advance, the money, you'll get that on the evening before the holiday. Otherwise you'll go on the spree immediately, and we shall lose two working days.'

The carpenters hesitated, whispered once again, but the chairman turned his attention to another matter. This was a disagreeable business. During his absence it had been necessary to slaughter a cow. For some reason the storekeeper did not accept the meat from the farm manager, apparently because it had not been branded, and for some reason the farm manager had not put it in the refrigerator; neither of them had had the good sense to sell it to a restaurant, so the meat had gone bad.

We were interested to hear what decision would be taken. The chairman was severe but just. The meat had been wasted entirely through the negligence of two people, consequently they

must make up the loss. They ought also, perhaps, to lose their jobs; for the question was not so much the value of the cow, as the attitude of these people to a matter of common concern.

We had long been interested in the question of democratic planning, to which reference is so often made in the press.

'It all depends on the chairman,' Kireev explained. 'If the chairman is timid and goes in fear of the district officials, he will do what they tell him. But if he is a stronger type, he will follow the line suggested from below, the workers on his farm.'

'So if there is firmness, it is possible to follow a line from below?'

'Why not? We have it directly stated in government decrees that there must be scope for the initiative of the kolkhozniks, but of course it means a tussle with the local district officials. We had an instance here, you can judge for yourselves. When I came here last year, they were late in harvesting the seed clover. It fell and sowed itself. It was not hard to foresee that good clover would grow in that field next year. But I was told to plough it up. I refused to do so, and I received the same instructions again.'

'Who gave these instructions?'

'A young girl, nineteen years old perhaps, from the Machine-Tractor Station. Our agronomist took her side. What was I to do? I realised that we were deciding a matter of concern to the whole kolkhoz, not just a private dispute between the agronomist and myself. I called a meeting of the kolkhozniks: "What about it, men?" The peasants understand farming. "We won't do it and that's our last word!" Real democracy. So we did not give way, and we waited.'

'And what happened?'

'A wonderful crop of clover. We piled up thirty-seven stacks, you can see them, like mushrooms all over the field. There have been other cases too. I was given a plan for wheat—to sow forty-five hectares. I saw that this was laughable, and instead of forty I sowed three hundred. And nothing happened, everyone was content. We have begun to grow vegetables for the first time, three times more than the plan. The main thing is that we must have confidence in the kolkhoznik. Perhaps in the early days there was need of supervision, instructions and suggestions at every step. But many years have passed since

then. Do you suppose he does not know his own land, or does not want to do the best for himself?’

We were directed to spend the night with Nicholas Ivanovich Sedov. This was done with a purpose. Sedov had been born, spent his childhood and lived until the Revolution in the manor house, and was said to know a lot about Bagration. He was an old man of seventy, and he made a powerful impression on us. His face looked to have been forged of dark bronze. Bushy eyebrows, a hooked nose, thin lips—all was strong, noble, handsome. Rather than bronze perhaps, his face was as though made of dark oak, a wooden carving. He was dressed in a shirt, loose above his trousers and open over his chest, and altogether he was like an oak, thickset and solid. The body showing through his shirt was of dark oak. He drank tea, sweated, and then his skin glistened like polished wood.

The kolkhozniks did not miss a chance of taunting Sedov. They said that he had been the prince’s lackey, had run his errands, and licked the plates after him. But Nicholas bore all this with stoicism, and in spite of his age worked conscientiously for the kolkhoz.

In Sedov’s china cupboard, among a peasant’s simple possessions—glasses, cups and so forth—there was a small object from the distant, vanished past, like a fragment of Atlantis, washed up on the shore by the tide. This was an ostrich egg, set into a carved gilt frame. It was enough to conjure up a picture of an elegant drawing-room with gleaming parquet, heavy curtains, chandeliers and elegant ladies in rustling dresses.

The past world has vanished, but occasionally we get a glimpse of it through just such an ostrich egg, or a little statuette of Japanese carving, found by children in the ground, or a bush of foreign roses, flowering on kolkhoz land, or a barrel of wine, discovered among the roots when a tree is being dug up. But if external objects of the old world continue to exist, it must mean that inner traces of it live on in the hearts and minds of men . . .

Nicholas Ivanovich could tell us nothing new about Bagration. It is true that his great-grandmother did remember the prince, and was present when he died. She had told her great grandson about this, but he had forgotten a great deal.

‘Only the book states wrongly that Bagration died on the first floor in the corner room. He died on the ground floor, I know the very room. My great-grandmother remembered this well. She was young then and was Bagration’s favourite among all the maidservants.’ The old man again wiped his perspiring face with the hooked nose and thin lips, the colour of polished oak.

The Thirteenth Day

While spending long winter evenings in the Lenin Library I once came upon a small but curious book entitled: 'The Village of Vesky, Estate of Vladimir Vasilievich Kalachev', published in 1853.

The book begins with information about its position: Vesky was situated seventy-five versts from Vladimir, twelve from Yuriev-Polsky, seven from the market town of Sima, and finally one hundred and seventy from Moscow.

Since he had little to occupy his time, the landowner decided to make an inventory of his possessions. He wrote down all manner of things: the number of male peasants, and of women in the population, the amount of hay gathered from the river-banks and valleys, the quantity of birch logs, the number of carp in the four ponds. He wrote down the harvest yield of various crops—rye, oats, buckwheat, lentils, barley, peas, hemp—the number of cows and horses, the price of all goods and the scale of rents and taxes.

He also noted down the clothing of the peasants. For example, the men wore 'sheepskin coats, the wealthier ones—tanned, long cloth tunics, on feast-days velveteen trousers, on workdays—trousers of coarse coloured cloth, and on their feet—boots or bast shoes. The young dandies wear caps, the older men wear felt hats with narrow brims.

'The peasant women wear long sleeveless dresses, head scarves with a cotton cap beneath on feast days, woollen stockings and slippers.'

He also revealed that the peasants in Vesky are 'gentle and industrious, polite in conversation, they speak with the Vladimir accent . . . As a cure for fever, they take a copper five-copeck coin or two silver copecks, make them red-hot and put them in a glass of wine, which they drink off at a gulp. The fever often abates after one treatment. For chills they induce perspiration by steaming themselves and rub their bodies with oil. They celebrate marriages by amicable agreement and by the

permission of the landowner . . . Calves are kept within the houses until they are six weeks . . . In the centre of the village there is a post with a bell.'

Naturally as we entered Vesky our first thought was to look for this post. Would it still be there? But we saw no post with a bell.

We asked two dark-haired, ready-tongued young women who were on their way back from the fields whether there had formerly been a landowner, Kalachev, in Vesky. They replied that there certainly had been a landowner (there was his house among the trees), but they did not know whether his name was Kalachev. So the 'gentle, industrious peasants' had long since forgotten their 'benefactor'.

We bought some milk from one of these women; it was creamy and cold, we found no better in the whole course of our journey. The women told us that there was no one left in the kolkhoz office, everyone was out in the fields. But in fact in one of the rooms I did find a young man, who was looking through some papers. He had not shaved for several days, and he now had a few long hairs on his chin and upper lip. He gave me his hand without looking up from his papers, and asked me to sit, and thus we sat facing each other for some time.

At last the young man finished reading, flung himself back in his chair, and introduced himself as the local agronomist. His name was Alexander Mikhailovich Dyachkov.

It took me a little time to make clear the purpose of my visit. I began with the Lenin Library and the landowner Kalachev and his little book. It was this which had aroused my desire to come and have a look, to see the changes after a hundred years.

Alexander Mikhailovich understood this very well, and was delighted and interested: he threw aside his papers.

'So they lighted their houses with wood splinters? And married by permission of the landowner? What about their rents?'

I turned over the pages and found the required paragraph: 'Rent is 15 silver roubles a year, state taxes and local dues — 3½. For pasturage on the master's land—one hen and 20 eggs. And the women supply 10 metres of cloth each. Barshchina three days a week.'

'What does barshchina mean?' Alexander Mikhailovich asked.

‘A kind of labour service, when the peasant worked on the landowner’s land.’

‘What else does he note down about our ancestors?’

‘Let’s see. “There are five people who are literate. At the order of the landowner some boys are being instructed in the church writings and in a trade, for example, the trade of a wheelwright, blacksmith or cobbler.”’

‘Just think of that! Five who are literate! Nowadays everyone is literate. But as for trades—we’ve a falling off there. We have no wheelwrights, nor cartmakers.’

‘The ground is cultivated by a two-horse wooden plough’ I read on further, ‘all the grain is cut by the sickle, and in the autumn, chiefly at night, is threshed by flails. The threshers are paid 20 silver copecks for 100 sheaves, and food is provided by the master . . .’

‘Extraordinary,’ said the agronomist in amazement. ‘It does not seem to be about our village, but about another world.’

‘So it was another world. But don’t laugh! I am going to read you something really interesting, especially to you, an agronomist. Listen: “Next year I shall attempt to plant potatoes in a crosswise pattern, so that it may be possible to plough both along and across the furrow.”’

‘The devil!’ the agronomist shouted, leaping from his chair. ‘That is precisely the square-cluster method of planting. Here, in Vesky, 100 years ago! I must copy that down at once. This is the best propaganda for the kolkhozniks. The landowner knew how to do it, are we not to do it so well? Or will you tell me where to get this book, and I will write for it?’

‘Write to the Lenin Library, perhaps they will send it. The circumstances are exceptional!’

‘Yes, they’ll send it. They couldn’t refuse. It is real propaganda! Does he write about the harvest?’

‘He writes: On the landowner’s land rye was harvested five-fold. On the peasants’ own land, presumably less.’

‘Is that so!’ the agronomist exulted. ‘We’ve outstripped him there. We had a six-fold yield of rye in the kolkhoz. And oats? Wheat?’ Alexander Mikhailovich bombarded me with questions.

He came out to the entrance to see me off, and we said goodbye warmly, both well content with our meeting and conversation.

‘Where are you making for now? On foot? That won’t do. We’ll drive you.’

In five minutes a lorry drove up to the office. Alexander Mikhailovich was ready to be so offended by a refusal that we were obliged to climb in. We drove off towards a violet storm-cloud looming up from behind the forest. Big drops of rain, added to the speed of the lorry, stung our faces like grape-shot. But freshness, coolness and an indescribable lightness of heart were spreading over the parched earth, so that we wanted to sing and shout absurdities.

Before very long, in three weeks’ time, the rain would become a curse. But now it was a blessing, and people raised faces bright with smiles and hope to the golden drops falling from the dark sky.

At Chislovsky Gorodishchy we knocked on the roof of the driver’s cabin.

The heavy rain, which had laid the dust but not yet made the



road muddy, had now stopped. During the downpour raindrops had clashed and knocked against each other in the air, forming a very fine mist. Now this delicate mist hung in the air, not falling to the ground. It lit up a wide, brilliant rainbow. Wisps of cloud were hurriedly sailing into this magnificent arch.

In the museum they had kept talking to us about Chislovsky Gorodishchy, and this site would evidently be interesting, if one were to take a spade and engage in a planned, lengthy, scientifically based excavation. Then one would come upon Arabian coins, crania pierced by arrows, oaken faggots, from which things one could judge what towns were once here.

But now there is only a village like any other. In the middle there is an excellently preserved high rampart, surrounded by water. The fact that there is still water in the moat makes Gorodishchy unique. But neither the rampart nor the water stirred our imagination, since we did not know, nor does anyone know positively, what had taken place here so many centuries ago.

But the wide and deep valley between the Avdov and Yuriev hills, the so-called Lipetskoye field, is another matter. It was beginning to be submerged in the dusk of early evening when we entered it. It was here that Ruslan may once have ridden, crying the famous words: 'Oh field, field, who has sown you with dead bones!'

It is true that now there was no sign of bones. The usual meadow grasses and some low bushes in the middle of the valley—that made all the view before us. During the centuries the river has disappeared, but the bushes showed where the stream had been. For the chronicler states clearly: 'a battle by the river Lipetsa.' Involuntarily we began to look more carefully on the ground beneath our feet, hoping to see the tip of a spear, or a rusty battle-axe, or the spike from a rotted helmet. But we only discovered a fragment of a wooden rake, clearly of more recent origin.

We stood now at the bottom of the valley, right between the two hills, on the site of a most violent battle. The Russian earth here drank in streams of Russian blood—only Russian, no other.

In the end all the princes remained unharmed, both those who fled, and those who were the victors; but the valley was

strewn with peasant corpses. So be it, if they had perished for the freedom of their country, the independence of the nation, for some high ideal. So be it, if they had perished in mortal combat with a foreign army, so as to demonstrate to him and to later ages the strength and the boldness of the Slav axe. But it was written clearly in the chronicle: 'Son went against father, brother against brother, serfs against their masters.'

I have no inclination to idealise our ancient history. For many centuries Russian princes did little but rend each other. Ordinary folk fared most bitterly in these encounters. So it was in this battle of Lipetsa. Did it bring any glory to Russian arms? Did it bring any blessing to the Russian land?

It is time, perhaps, to relate the circumstances of the battle. I have read of it in Kostomarov, Soloviev and Karamzin, and also partially in the chronicles. This is the story as I read it.

The sons of Prince Vsevolod Bolshoye Gnezdo, Constantine and Yury, after the death of their father, disputed the succession to the throne of Suzdal. Their other brother, Yaroslav, at this time did great offence to the city of Great Novgorod, obstructing the highway thither and causing a pestilence. Parents sold their children into slavery for a crust of bread, people were dying of hunger in the streets and market-places. Corpses lay about the roads and were torn by dogs. The people of Novgorod sent to Yaroslav and begged him to come to them, but he held back the emissaries of the people and made no answer. Then, according to the chronicle, there was great grief and wailing in Novgorod.

Then Mstislav stood forth among the citizens of Novgorod, resolving to come to the rescue of the city. He struck the bell of assembly, and the citizens took up their axes. Mstislav proclaimed a second goal—to bring peace between the princes of Suzdal. He proposed to Yaroslav to settle all by peaceful ways.

Yaroslav answered: 'I do not wish for peace. Come, there will be one hundred of our men to one of yours.'

The whole land of Suzdal was in arms. The farmers were driven from their villages to war. The people of Murom and nomad bands from the eastern steppes rallied to the people of Suzdal. Mstislav too had an allied army: with him marched

the people of Pskov and Smolensk and Constantine, brother of the princes of Suzdal.

The armies met at the river Lipetsa, near the town of Yuriev, in that spot where we were now standing in the dusky river valley, lately washed by rain.

Mstislav once again proposed peace: 'Set free my Novgorod men. Return the Novgorod lands. Make peace with us and kiss our cross, then we will not shed blood.'

Yaroslav answered: : 'We do not wish for peace; your men remain with me; you have come here from afar, but you have come forth like fish on to dry land.'

The patient Mstislav spoke forth again: 'Brothers Yury and Yaroslav! We have come not to shed blood. God grant that it does not come to that. We have come to seek justice among ourselves; for we are of one tribe . . .'

Yaroslav answered: 'You have come, but how do you hope to depart?'

After this he and his brother and the boyars made a feast in their tent. The drunken boyars incited yet more the young, quarrelsome princes. 'Princes Yury and Yaroslav,' they shouted, 'it has never been in the time of our fathers, nor of our grandfathers, nor our great-grandfathers, that anyone has brought an army into the powerful land of Suzdal and departed back unharmed. Yes, even if the whole Russian land were to come against us, Galich and Kiev, Smolensk and Chernigov and Novgorod and Ryazan, even so they would not work their will on us; but as for these troops, we will knock them from their saddles.'

History does not relate what words were said at this time among the followers stationed near the tent. But the drunken princes spoke thus to the drunken boyars: 'Merchandise has come of itself into our hands. You will have horses, armour, robes; he who takes a man alive, shall himself be killed; even if his tunic be embroidered with gold, kill him: there will be a double reward from us! We shall leave not one man alive. And he who flees from his station, him we shall seize and order that he be hanged or crucified.'

Then, dismissing the boyars, the bold princes set to dividing the possessions of the vanquished. 'To me, brother Yaroslav,' said Yury, 'shall come the lands of Vladimir and Rostov, to

you—Novgorod, Smolensk to our brother Svyatoslav, Kiev we still bestow on the princes of Chernigov, and Galich to ourselves!’

That night the armies advanced towards each other. In the camp of the men of Novgorod the trumpets sounded and the warriors raised a shout. Their shouting caused a turmoil in the ranks of the men of Suzdal. For some time the armies gazed on one another in the morning sunlight and did not engage battle.

And for the fourth time Mstislav sent emissaries to the princes of Suzdal:

‘Make peace, or if you do not wish for peace, either retreat from here to level ground and we will make an attack upon you, or we will retreat to the Lipetsa and you shall attack us.’

‘I do not accept peace, nor will I retreat,’ Yaroslav replied. ‘You have marched through all our land, will you not make your way across this little thicket?’

Then Mstislav cried out to his army: ‘Brothers, a hill cannot help us, and a hill will not conquer us; behold the power of the holy cross and the truth: let us go against them!’

In his camp were the glorious champions—Alexander Popovich with his servant Torop, and Dobrynya Rezanich, nicknamed the Golden Belt. Riding through the ranks of warriors the prince exhorted them: ‘Brothers, we have come against a mighty land: keep your eyes on God and stand firm. Do not turn your eyes back. If conquered, you will not make your escape. Brothers, let us forget our wives, our children and homes. Go into battle, as it pleases each one to die—on horseback or on foot!’

‘We do not wish to die on horseback, we will fight on foot, as our fathers fought at the Koloksha!’ shouted the men of Novgorod. With these words they cast off their outer clothing and their boots, and ran forward barefoot. A savage battle began. Mstislav himself three times rode through the enemy striking right and left with his axe, which was fastened to his wrist with a leather strap.

‘The cries of the wounded and the howling of the men as they were struck were heard even in Yuriev-Polsky, and there was no one to bury the corpses of the slain. Many as they fled were drowned in the river; those who remained alive fled, some to Vladimir, some to Pereyaslavl, others to Yuriev.’

The first to flee was the greatest braggart of them all, Yaroslav. After him followed Yury. Towards evening the one reached Pereyaslavl, the other—Vladimir.

Many centuries have passed. The river has sunk down and dried away, there remain only bushes in the valley bed.

After so great a stretch of time, the events of the past seem unreal. All these helmets, bodyguards, Mstislavs and Yaroslavs seem to us more like names in a book than living people and tangible things. Perhaps there never was a battle of Lipetsa? Perhaps it was imagined by the chronicler? How can you be sure?

But once, and comparatively recently, a woman from the village of Adamov, which was two or three kilometres from where we were standing, was plucking grass in a thicket for her cow. She saw something glittering and picked it up. It was an iron helmet, and a very strange one. She shook it and brushed off the soil, and discovered a small icon and some writing inscribed on the helmet. Beneath the helmet was a lump of iron, which seemed to be made up of rings, but these were fastened together by rust and could not be separated. But the matter of greatest interest was that all this was found not in the ground, but lying on the surface, as though it had been thrown down only yesterday. It was recognised as the war helmet of Yaroslav, which he either lost or threw away during his flight. The helmet is now kept in the Armoury of the Moscow Kremlin.

We too wandered among the bushes, to see if we might catch sight of something glittering. But such good fortune does not happen twice. Moreover it was growing quite dark. The moon had risen over the field of battle, close by a quail was tapping loudly, and the noiseless shadow of an owl passed above us.

So our thirteenth day came to an end on the bloodstained but now silent Lipetsa battlefield.

The Fourteenth Day

Take a hill one and a half kilometres in length and half a kilometre in height, covered with short, smooth grass. Bend it round in a horseshoe, along the top set down a row of small wooden houses with a white, square church in the centre, and down below lay the gleaming, winding ribbon of a fairly narrow river. Let there be trees and bushes along the banks: alders, willows, broom. From above they will appear very tiny, but that is no matter. Beyond the river of course there must be meadows. Now, at the height of the flowering season, they will seem to you dark lilac, almost purple.

The meadows beside the Koloksha are level, as though the ground had been forcibly stretched out. The distant hills are fitted to them as various geometrical figures would be fitted to a plane. On these distant hills one can see villages, belfries, and clumps of trees; cornfields run down from the hills to the meadows, the gold making a sharp border with the green and the purple. Over all this sail white stacks of cumulus clouds, and higher still shines the sun.

There is only need to add that the river at the foot of the horseshoe hill curves in the exact shape of a black grouse's tail, that the cottages on the summit of the hill are set in two rows, not one, and that there is a transverse road, which ends by some overgrown but still bright ponds.

Here, in the end cottage just by the pond, we left our possessions, drank tea and were now preparing to stroll through the village. The cottage was a large one and kept in a state of incredible cleanliness. It was quite frightening to walk up the steps, through the entrance and over the rugs in the inner room. We asked our hostess, a hospitable old woman, Mariya Ivanovna, to spread some mats and bits of cloth, so that we should not be so afraid to step on the floor.

We went reluctantly from the cool cleanliness of the house into the street, where the air was stifling before a storm.

One house in Varvarino stood out among all the rest—a

two-storied stone house with a rectangular lantern, also of stone, on the roof. Semi-circular windows looked out in all four directions from this lantern. Within the house there had been at one time a circular hall, into which slanting beams of light penetrated from above from four directions. There was scaffolding now both on the outside and inside of this house, which was being converted into a village club; before this it had been a children's home, and before that again it had belonged to a landowner.

I shall not claim that we were told everything about this house here in the village. On the contrary we came to Varvarino already knowing a great deal. But it is one thing to know, and quite another to see with one's own eyes.

At first the village belonged to one of the Decembrists, apparently to a friend of Pushkin, Michael Fedorovich Mitkov, but in the second half of the last century it became the property of Katherine Fedorovna Tyutcheva, the daughter of the poet. All this would not be of great interest, but for one event.

In 1878 the Russian army defeated the Turks and liberated Bulgaria. A big, independent new state was established in the Balkans; its frontiers were marked out by the agreement of San-Stefano. Some European states were displeased by the strengthening of Bulgaria, and at the Berlin Congress the agreement of San-Stefano was subjected to revision. The Russian Government made concessions and piece after piece began to be carved from Bulgaria. Since the war had been very popular with the Russian public, the subsequent action of the Government aroused universal, strong indignation.

Ivan Sergeevich Aksakov, a well-known public figure, pamphleteer and chairman of the Slav Committee, was more indignant than the rest, since he was a more consistent and fiery Slavophil than others.

On the eve of taking his decisive step he wrote: 'I ask myself: is it honourable to be silent at this moment? Is it not the direct duty of every citizen to do all that is in his power, and which cannot be prohibited—to raise his voice in protest? Russia is being crucified, Russia is being shamed, Russia is being turned into a renegade from her historic mission and vocation—and we are all as dumb as fish!'

On June 22nd, 1878, Ivan Sergeevich returned from the

Slav Committee in an exalted state and noted down: 'The die is cast. The speech has been delivered.'

After a few days he received a reprimand from Alexander II for this speech, he was removed from his position as chairman and given orders to go into exile.

'We could not be bent, so we had to be broken to pieces,' Aksakov answered.

At that time Dostoevsky reminded him: 'I foretold to you that you would be exiled for this speech.'

For his place of exile Ivan Sergeevich chose the estate of his sister-in-law. He was married to Tyutchev's second daughter, Anna Fedorovna. While he was travelling there by post-chaise, his speech was widely publicised both in Russia and abroad with the title 'Historic Curse of Aksakov'. His name was on all lips.

O. A. Novikova wrote: 'All are in terrible anger because of the expulsion of Aksakov from Moscow for his truthful words. If Aksakov deserved punishment, then evidently I too am guilty, but thousands of Russians think and feel as he does.'

P. I. Chaikovsky wrote: 'We are living through a terrible time, and when you reflect on it, you feel afraid . . . On the one hand a completely dumbfounded government, so bewildered that Aksakov has been exiled for his bold, just words . . .'

P. Tretyakov wrote: 'So Aksakov has had to state alone in public what all other people were thinking . . .'

The result of all this hubbub was that Tretyakov asked Ilya Efimovich Repin to follow immediately after Aksakov to the village of Varvarino and paint his portrait for his gallery—the gallery which is now called the Tretyakov.

Meanwhile Ivan Sergeevich, torn away from the bustle of Moscow, and removed far from the tense strain of the last few days, plunged into an ocean of summer, flowery, honey-scented tranquillity. He was in ecstasy with the place of his exile. 'I enjoy the harmonious combination of luxurious refinement together with village simplicity, charming seclusion together with a magnificent spaciousness. The house is a delightful toy, but you go out on the verandah and your eyes are led away to the boundless distance—such is the expanse, such is the solemn tranquillity in which the soul is immersed.'

Meanwhile Repin was travelling from Moscow to Varvarino, and one day Aksakov's wife, Anna Fedorovna, wrote to her sister, the owner of the estate: 'This morning, when I got up, the sound of the bells of an approaching troika caused me some disquiet, but it turned out that this was some young painter from Moscow, sent by Pavel Tretyakov to my husband, with the request to allow him to paint his portrait for his portrait gallery of noteworthy persons. They have already settled down to work in the drawing-room.'

Aksakov himself referred to Repin in the following terms:

'The painter Repin is very talented and very modest, still quite a young man; he has been sent here by Tretyakov to make a portrait of me for his gallery.

'Without delaying the matter, I put myself at his disposal, and in three days the portrait was done. Today it is drying.'

We also have some recollections of Repin on this episode:

'Many people have strange ideas about art. I am a realist, and I have never embellished or concealed nature. I remember an incident relating to Ivan Sergeevich Aksakov. I was beginning to work on his portrait, and he said to me: "Ilya Efimovich, you know, if you want to do my portrait as it should be done, reduce the size of my face a bit, it is too fleshy."

'And in fact Ivan Sergeevich Aksakov's face was red, fleshy and massive. But that was just what seemed to me to be very characteristic of him, and he asked me to paint his face thin and pale.'

However, for us now in Varvarino the greatest interest was contained in a passage from a letter written by Aksakov, which had been read to us in the Yuriev-Polsky museum. He wrote to the owner of the estate:

'Repin is so delighted by Varvarino and its views, that he has used a free day to make a sketch of one of these views as a souvenir. Unfortunately he had no water colours or coloured pencils with him, and even more unfortunately the weather, which was sunny at first, turned cloudy and then cold with rain and wind.

'Nevertheless, in spite of the rain and wind, he painted a charming view straight on to the canvas with oils—a view which you may not know: it is from a point low down, not far from the river bank, to the left of the wooden platforms

where the linen is washed ; if you cross the meadow from the grove which stretches up the hill, where a path leads to the mill, across the water and part of the garden you can see the whole church and some of the rowan-trees of the former Pushkin estate.'

Serega fortunately had water colours, and naturally he wanted to paint Varvarino from the spot where the great painter had painted it.

The trouble was that not one of the objects mentioned by Aksakov—the wooden platforms, the mill, the grove stretching up the hill, the garden and the rowan-trees—still remained. There were only the river and the church, and the church could be viewed from many points.

The slope of the hill where we were going down to the river was scattered over with tree-stumps. Accordingly we had found out where the garden had been. We ran round or leaped over the stumps, and came down to the river. The point of departure in Aksakov's letter was the place where the washing was done; if we could find this, then we should have in our hands the end of the thread from which we could unravel the whole ball. But who could tell us where the washing platforms had been eighty years ago?

We walked dejectedly along the bank of the Koloksha, and Serega sat down to make a sketch, in despair of finding Repin's spot. But as we were returning to the village, we met a woman with a linen-basket on her shoulder.

'Stop, wait! We must watch where she goes for rinsing her linen. After all eighty years is not such a long time, and village traditions die hard. The platforms have not been preserved, but the women of Varvarino may still go to the same place.'

We followed behind the woman. We should have helped her to carry such a heavy basket, but we were so afraid of startling her and destroying her instinctive sense of direction, that we lingered a hundred paces behind.

The woman approached the river at a bend, where we should never have thought of looking for Repin's viewpoint. She spread a cloth on the grass, emptied out her clothes on to it, rinsed the basket in the running water, and began to dabble her garments in the river.

'So then—to the left of the platforms . . . across the meadow from the grove . . . where a path leads to the mill . . .'

We quickly came upon a small, worn track, which perhaps at one time had led to a mill. Finally, having checked everything once again, we cried: 'Here! Repin sat here!' A mistake of a few paces naturally made no difference.

'Yes, but we shall never be able to verify whether we have guessed correctly,' Serega said regretfully.

'Why not? Repin's picture is not a needle in a haystack, it must be kept somewhere.'

'What if it is in Switzerland, or Finland, or Amsterdam or somewhere?'

'He left it to the owner of the estate, and it is scarcely likely that it found its way abroad. We must investigate.'

At this point I must go on ahead and tell that, on returning to Moscow, I did come on the track of Repin's picture. I was told that it was most probably in the private collection of Professor Zilberstein. I looked through the telephone book and found the professor's address and number. I phoned to him immediately.

'Yes, I have the picture. Come whenever you like.'

I discovered the right house, the right doorway and the right bell. As I expected to see some ancient being in a scholar's cap and quilted dressing-gown, I was surprised when the door was opened to me by a thin man, still young, in striped pyjamas.

It was a dull, snowy day out of doors, so my eyes were dazzled by a summer sun, lighting up the vivid green of a forest. A moment later I realised that I was looking at one of the less well-known masterpieces of Shishkin.

The professor's flat was a treasure-house of Russian painting. An original Repin, an original Shishkin, an original Vasnetsov, an original Polenov, and how many more! And at last I saw my native Koloksha. In the foreground a steely curve of the river, the distant slope of a hill in the dark green of the park, to the left a church stood among dark green, and above it all were cold, steely-grey clouds. For Repin had been painting on a day of rain and wind. He had been most successful of all in catching the rainy sky in this picture. The simple inscription below read: 'View of the village of Varvarino.'

Now I could say confidently that we had been standing where Repin had painted this scene. We had found his viewpoint correctly.

But all this took place later, and meanwhile after bathing in the Koloksha we climbed back up the hill, well satisfied with our researches. The day was fading. On the following morning we were to leave this most beautiful village of Varvarino.

To round off this bit of history, I must mention that quite recently, while wandering through the streets of the capital of Bulgaria, I suddenly noticed that I was in a street named after Ivan Aksakov, one of the central streets of Sophia. I was glad that the Bulgarians had not forgotten and had even perpetuated the memory of their Russian friend and champion.

Perhaps the villagers of Varvarino also will have the same thought and will call the village club, into which they are turning the 'delightful toy', by his name. Why should they not? For he has given long life to their village in his verses.

Marya Petrovna had not laid down mats on her freshly scoured boards.

'Don't be afraid to tread on them. That is why we wash them, so that the floor may be clean to walk on. The girls will be home and they will wash it down.'

Meanwhile a woman's high, clear voice could be heard singing a humorous dance song, and several other voices joined in the chorus. We darted to the window and saw eight women, all about forty years of age, going past the house. They were carrying spades, and were not merely walking, but were singing and dancing.

'Who are they?'

'They are coming from work. They have been digging a silo pit, and then they have been sitting in my garden.'

'Why were they doing that?'



‘They were having a rest and a drink after their work, and eating a bit of onion from the garden. They are all widows. They lost their husbands early, and a woman’s energy needs an outlet. There are sixty houses in the village, and sixty men did not return from the war.’

For a long time we were haunted by the memory of the widows of Varvarino, still now only in their forties, with their boisterous but bitter gaiety. When one sees that, one has no need of any posters with anti-war slogans.

At dawn the next day we set out from Varvarino.

The Fifteenth Day

Small boys, as they splash about in a willow-hung pool, or run through the shallows, or drag a sharp-pincered crayfish from his silty hole, or as they simply lie in the sun near the quiet water, seldom speculate as to where their river comes from, where it has its source.

The river was flowing when these small boys were not yet born, and it will still be flowing when again they will not be in the world. For them the river is like time itself, like the earth and the air. It cannot have either an end or a beginning.

But sometimes, most often when they begin going to school and have their first geography lessons, the question will arise and trouble their young minds.

With a conspiratorial air they will gather in a small group and whisper together; pieces of bread will disappear from their parents' table, the breadknife too will vanish, for though it is too thin and rounded, still in a child's imagination it will serve as a cutlass or dagger.

The expedition will set out early in the morning and return in the evening, rent by schism, ideological waverings and finally by the revolt of the poor-spirited, without discovering where and how the river begins. However it is certain that country children have no other idea of the beginning of any river than of a cold spring bursting forth from below ground.

That is how I pictured the source of our Vorshcha: green grass, a shady bush, and from beneath it clear, ice-cold water wells up, murmuring. But where was it, this spring? I wearied my elders with questions.

'If you go along beside the river,' my father explained carefully, 'you will come to Zhuravlikha—a big, dark forest. Don't enter it, for there are brigands there. After the forest there is open country again, and then you will come to the village of Busino. Our Vorshcha has its source near Busino. When you grow up, you will go there.'

But in childhood a wait of five minutes is not to be endured,

so how is it possible to wait till one is grown up? With a reliable friend I set off on the great expedition. We were so small that we were afraid to go even a step away from the bank, in order to take a straight path when the river made a loop. We walked along the bank, and the earth was revealed to us as if it had been newly created. We should have been afraid to bathe, and perhaps we should not have been surprised if a crocodile's knobbly snout had peered at us from beneath a bush. The river led us away from reality into its own mysterious fairy-tale world.

It must be said to our credit that when we reached the Zhuravlikha forest, we did not immediately turn back, but still went on for a little while, pushing our way through the thickets along the bank, chiefly of bird-cherry and raspberry.

Our confidence was shattered when we came to a clearing which stretched up a slope—or rather not the clearing itself, but a cottage which stood there. If a dog had rushed out at us, or if someone had shouted, it would have been less frightening. But the cottage was silent, and seemed empty, though smoke rose from the chimney. My father's stories about brigands could not be forgotten so quickly. We glanced round and fled.

We were told later that some people called Kositsin lived in the lodge. But who were the Kositsins, why did they live, as in a fairytale, alone in the dark forest on the bank of a river, in the middle of a clearing red with wild strawberries? Perhaps they really were brigands?

When my childhood was left behind and the world lost its mystery, outside interests claimed me and there was no time to return to my bright dream, bright as the river itself—to find the source of the Vorshcha.

Now, as we looked at the map, we held the point of a pencil over the hamlets and villages. Putting a cross beside a village with the interesting name of Ratislovo, we found the pencil close up against a tiny dot, next to which was written in very small letters the short word Busino, a word which rose up to the surface from the depths of my heart, out of the secret corners of my memory.

In Ratislovo we rested for half the day under a willow beside a pond. There were many ponds in this village. They lay in two parallel lines and would have been very beautiful, and

would also have supplied a lot of fish, if they had not been overgrown with reeds and duckweed, silted up and reduced in size. The duckweed lay in such a solid layer that a stone flung into the pond left no trace. Reeds advanced from the bank out to the centre of the pond; one could imagine that, advancing as a green army in orderly ranks, they would soon occupy all the territory of the pond, joining up with their brethren coming to meet them from the direction of an island, which rose up above the green of the duckweed, like a mighty green explosion.

The three wanderers naturally attracted the attention of the inhabitants of Ratislovo, particularly since Serega's beard had grown to such remarkable proportions that its owner might easily be taken for a criminal.

The kolkhoz chairman agreed that it would not be a bad idea to clean out the ponds, but the farm was only just beginning to develop, and for the time being it could not pay any attention to them. Besides that, they would need an excavator, and there was not a single one in the district.

'They are all away, digging up the virgin lands,' the chairman said bitterly, 'and meanwhile here in the central areas the ponds are being ruined. Here they are, dug ready for us by our forefathers, they only need to be cleaned out and put in order.'

We asked where we could bathe, and were told that there was one pond, evidently a very deep one, which was still fit for that. We also asked the chairman for a horse, for Rosa sometimes became tired before the evening.

A smart-looking lad was instructed to see to this. For a long time he made excuses and did his best to refuse; neither threats nor peaceful exhortations were of any avail. The whole matter depended on who would tire first—the chairman of asking, the boy of refusing, or we of listening to their argument. Just as we were going to abandon the project, the boy gave way, and a lean bay horse was harnessed to a cart and lazily moved off, stirring up the dust of the road.

Serega and I walked beside the cart, and Rosa, the boy and our possessions rode. Now and again the horse stopped. The lad made a show of urging it on, and then said to himself in a voice loud enough for us to hear: 'We'll go as far as that clump

of trees and no farther, the horse absolutely won't move.' However, when we reached the clump of trees, he did not dare to turn back, but repeated the scene with variations: 'We'll cross this field, but no farther.' He did this three times, and finally summoned up courage to stop.

We ourselves were feeling uncomfortable, thinking that perhaps we really were goading on such a tired horse unnecessarily. However, as soon as the boy had driven some thirty paces from us, he brandished the reins above his head, and so long as we could see him (and we could see him for about two kilometres) he drove the horse at either a gallop or a trot.

Towards the end of the day we walked into the village of Busino together with a herd of cows and a translucently-golden cloud of dust, smelling of fresh milk. The brigadier's house was at the end of a long row, stretching along the edge of a wide, sloping ravine. The master of the house was not at home, and we sat on the bank outside together with his wife, who was nursing a small child. By degrees the number of children round the woman increased, until finally all her six fine little sons



were gathered there. The oldest was not more than ten or eleven.

We were quite fearful of asking the most important question: does the river Vorshcha have its source here? Supposing they were to say that they did not know of any Vorshcha, and that there was no river at all there? Why were they themselves silent about the fact of the source of the river? For it is not every village that can boast in this way. Most probably there was in fact nothing there. For where had I heard this about Busino? In my childhood from my father's stories. But a father will tell his child all manner of stories! And it is natural to amuse a child with fairy-tales.

The ground, covered with lush tall grass, sloped gently but far away down. The opposite side rose up more steeply. In the bottom of the ravine, in the purple twilight, white tufts of mist like cottonwool began to appear. The patches of cloud merged and lengthened out into a ribbon, and finally the ravine was half filled by a dense whiteness. This gave me hope. Such a mist would not form in any ordinary ravine, but only if river water were making its way through the grasses there in the bottom.

It had become quite dark when the father of the six sons, the kolkhoz brigadier, arrived — a young man in a faded tunic. He guided us to our night's lodging.

Inside the cottage it was even darker than outside in the road. However, the darkness could not conceal the fact that the room was in a neglected state; there was a mound of freshly chopped tobacco on the table, and our host, an old man with a round beard, was raking it into a wooden box. On the table there also lay about a number of pages torn from a calendar, intended for rolling cigarettes.

An oil lamp gave a wavering light, and we saw that the old man had red, rheumy eyes and fingers stained almost black.

An elderly woman, who was blowing up the fire, glanced at all of us, and then fixed me with a long, strange, inquiring look. She went out of the room, but then returned and began to busy herself with the samovar; now and again I caught her looking at me, so that I became quite uneasy. At first there was a dumb inquiry in her eyes, finally only pain. At last I ventured to ask her why she looked so at me; perhaps she had seen me before?

'I thought that my son had come back; at first you can't be sure. I had a son, he was exactly like you. I have been waiting for thirteen years. I have had no papers telling of his death, so it means that he must come sometime.'

'Don't talk that nonsense,' her old husband interrupted her gruffly. 'Those who are to return, have already returned long ago.'

The woman went out. The old man took down a photograph from the wall and handed it to us.

'It's true, you are like our Lenka, I too had my doubts.'

The photograph showed a young lad, round-faced, fair-haired, snub-nosed. I confess that I did not see any great likeness to myself, but a mother knows better, and there must have been some similarity.

I had not told my companions why we had come to Busino for fear we should arrive and find nothing. Now, in the evening, I had to make sure. I went out of the house. While we had been sitting indoors, the moon had risen, green and bright, as though it had just been washed in clean water. There was still more mist in the ravine, and it looked blue and silver in the moonlight. I almost ran down into the ravine. My trousers were soaked up to the knee, as though I had run into water, and my shoes began to squelch. Again the hope flashed into my mind: there could not be such a dew except near water.

There was a smell of mist. It was thick and solid. I plunged into it up to my waist, then it closed over my head. The clear outline of the moon was dimmed as though a cloud had passed over it. Silence enveloped me at the bottom of the ravine. Then in the silence I heard the distant but distinct burbling of water. I went towards the sound. A small ravine, a dead end, branched away from the main, big ravine. It was not more than a hundred paces long, and ended in a steep slope. A tall, branching willow grew at the entrance to it. Along this little ravine ran a rivulet, murmuring and tinkling, making for itself a narrow, deep bed, over which the grass grew so thickly that the rivulet itself was not visible.

By the steep slope at the farther end of the little ravine, the grasses rioted in an extraordinary manner, and there came from them the pungent, over-powering scent of meadow-sweet, filling the gully to the brim. Its luxuriant white flowers



glimmered with a green light. There, surrounded by these mighty grasses, was the cradle of the river.

Four rows of oak logs formed a rectangular enclosure, one and a half metres long, one metre wide. This black shining box was filled to the brim with water. But I only discovered this by touching the water with my hand. It was so clear that I could not see it.

Flowing from this enclosure, the water gained a voice and form, it began to gush and flow, to be a river.

Along the slopes of the ravine clover, pinks and buttercups made splashes of red, purple and yellow. Right above the cradle of the river grew a fine crop of wheat. Pollen from the blossoming flowers was carried down to the spring, and the fluffy heads

of dandelion seeds fell weightlessly on to the crystal water.

As it flowed along the gully, the rivulet was green, but I could imagine already how it would gleam and sparkle in the morning sun.

It was only thus —among grass, flowers and wheat—that our river Vorshcha could have its source. As it flowed on, it would meet with mud and dung and dull clay, but it would flow indifferently past all this, remembering its pure, flowery childhood.

This rivulet had still far to go before the first pool would be formed, and a new concept—depth—would appear.

It would be some while yet before it would flow with a clear smoothness, reflecting the trees on the banks and the clouds and the sun itself, and in the night-time the blue stars.

It would be some time yet before this young river would be able to boast of the heavy splash of a fish, making rosy circles of ripples on the morning water.

But now a girl, hot from walking, will wash herself in the river; a woman will come down to it and carry away two pails of translucent water on a yoke; now a quick shoal of perch will dart away from the splash, and an angler will cast his simple line towards the sedge.

Hamlets and villages will send up their smoke along the bank (they would not be here, were it not for the river), sickles will ring in the meadows. At the time of the haymaking the lads, by ancient custom, will throw the girls, dresses and all into the warm, midday water.

Here now is the first bridge over the Vorshcha. All kinds of rubbish is tipped from it into the river, so that is where the sharp-nosed chub rise from the bottom and feed.

The river flowed into my childhood, becoming almost the most important element in my life's story. Nothing has such a powerful and decisive influence on the forming of a child's psychology as a river flowing near by. The river is his first friend, his first toy, the first fairy-tale.

The Vorshcha is neither big nor famous. There are few legends relating to it. But is it such a bad thing that no one has ever been drowned in the river? For a river to achieve fame it is necessary for princes to be cast into its water, or for lovesick maidens to leap from its banks. We honour the bloodthirsty and

useless eagle, and are indifferent to the small bunting, chiff-chaff or fly-catcher, which are the salvation of our orchards and woods.

It is the very bloodthirstiness and cruelty of the eagle, which bring it honour, and which are celebrated in poetry and song. But have we any praise for the industrious yellow bunting, that small bird which destroys quantities of insect pests, and do we pity it when a bird of prey tears it to pieces?

So my Vorshcha has laboured unweariedly down the ages, doing service to man and bringing him gladness. The greatest happiness it brings is to the children. Like the yellow bunting, the Vorshcha is not impressive for its size. But it has alders and water-lilies, pearly shells and gudgeon, willows and the dark depths of pools. And the white petals of bird-cherry are scattered on the water and float slowly down with the current.

I still remember how it was possible to capture a basket of fish with one's bare hands in the Vorshcha. It had quantities of chub, perch, ruff, roach, gudgeon and other small fish.

I could talk endlessly about the Vorshcha: I have had so many fishing adventures there, seen so many happy dawns, heard so many nightingales, walked so often along its banks in the night-time! I have read to it so many verses, and it has sung to me so many more with its quiet, friendly murmuring.

And now all this special, happy, unique world of the Vorscha was beginning at my feet, in a cradle of oak, among flowers and grasses and with wheat at its head.

The green water flowed among the dark grass, running towards the big, spreading willow. There the stream turned to the right and flowed along the big ravine, merging with other springs.

In the morning the three of us came down here again. How changed it was in the morning sunlight! The water was no longer green, but golden, almost flame-coloured. Heavy grey drops, like pearls, fell into it from the grass and flowers.

It appeared that there were seven springs, but the one which I had visited during the night was the biggest and is regarded as the chief one.

It was possible now to see down to the bottom of the cradle. It was sandy and clean. Here and there little fountains of sand spurted up in the still, almost glassy water, evidently where the

spring was bursting from the ground. I counted sixty tiny sandy fountains.

Of course we drank the water of the spring and washed our hands almost reverently. Then we set off down the stream. The water led us towards the spot where my irrecoverable, golden childhood was spent among the rye and the clover.

The Sixteenth Day

This day began, as you know, at the spring called Gremyachka, the source of the river Vorshcha.

The sun rose higher, the dew dried, and the first honey smells began to fill the empty, washed morning air. It was the peak of the blossoming season for all the wild flowers—that fragrant, bright, many-coloured season, which comes before the hay-making. Sometimes we were met by a smell of pure honey, which came from an apiary.

We came to villages, where an old woman would look at me from under her hand and say:

‘You look like someone I know. Do you come from Olepino?’

‘Yes, from Olepino.’

‘I see that you do.’

‘Why?’

‘By the looks of you. You look familiar.’

We came to the forest of Zhuravlikha, and entered it from the other, farther end, to which I had never penetrated before.

I began to look more carefully in the direction of the river, which was still flowing alongside us here. Should I see Petrukha sitting under a bush?

Petrukha was a remarkable character. He was a cobbler, but very seldom busied himself with his trade, for which reason he never raised himself out of abject poverty. However, he had no family except a wife, who was a slut. But the man responsible for the poverty-stricken state of the family spent days and nights by the river with his fishing-rods. He was no mere amateur fisherman, but a man possessed, an artist and evidently something of a poet, for he could be seen sitting motionless for hours by the water even without his rods.

He was always unshaven, he always wore a faded black shirt hanging loose over his trousers, always barefoot, always with two rods on his shoulder and a tin pail in his hand—such is my memory of Petrukha. His hair would no doubt have been unkempt, but he had it cut close to his head. He was about sixty years of age. I never saw him drunk.

Since no pies or dumplings awaited him at home, he used to roam for days by the river; he spent the nights too on the bank, feeding himself on fish soup or getting a meal in the village, given in exchange for a fresh fish.

It was said of him that he knew the 'word', for, in a spot where another would sit for a week and not get a bite, he would catch fish after fish; but he preferred to do this without witnesses. It can be said quite certainly that he never used anything special to entice the fish, and knew of no bait other than worms and bread.

I am indebted to Petrukha for my passion for angling — indebted till the end of my life, for this passion, unlike others, does not die away.

'Lekseich, it's time!' Thus he used to wake me while it was still dark. And we hurried off, shivering in the early morning cold, to some likely spot.

Now as we were approaching his cottage, I told my companions about Petrukha, and promised to organise a fishing expedition at dawn with his help. I had frequently spoken of him earlier too on our journey, so that they now showed some impatience to come to Olepino and look upon this renowned angler.

It is true that recently Petrukha had been failing in health. His feet gave him trouble because he was constantly walking through the dew and damp grass, and also, as I was told in letters, he coughed and suffered from shortness of breath.

Meanwhile we were approaching the forest lodge, where at one time the mysterious Kositsins had lived. Suddenly Rosa gave a shriek, as though she had trodden on a snake, or was on the point of treading on a mine. In point of fact this was the first time on our travels that she saw bright red strawberries among the grass. My native land was receiving us with gifts.

The strawberry trail, winding through the grass, was leading us lower and lower down the river bank, while from above we were being watched by a man in spectacles and a well-worn, dark blue tunic. He was as short as he was wide, his face was as round as it was good-humoured, and he was young and gay.

'Help me pull my car out, friends. I have become stuck in my native Zhuravlikha. I have only a small "Moskvich", so we can easily push it.'

‘Who are you?’

‘My name is Kositsin. You may know the name? We used to live in the lodge. I am on my way to visit the old people.’

So it was I met the younger Kositsin, a cheerful person, as he proved to be, an under-ice angler, a law graduate, a senior instructor at the Military Academy and a Hero of the Soviet Union.

Of course we pushed the ‘Moskvich’ free in a moment, and on the spot we made a solemn promise that on the very next day we would go with him in this same ‘Moskvich’ to fish in the river Koloksha, and spend the night out in the open, so that we should have two dawns.

There now remained no more than two kilometres to Olepino. As we left the Zhuravlikha forest we could already see beyond the hill a tiny belfry cross, showing that the belfry itself would soon be in sight, then the old lime-trees round it, then the roofs of the houses; then we should come to the Moskovkin pasture, and if my mother were to look out of her window just then, she would be able to see us.

The Seventeenth Day

My first task on waking was to put my fishing rods in order. To be truthful, they already were in good order, but for two whole years I had not touched them, and ahead of me was this very important fishing expedition to the Koloksha. Besides this, it has not been established which gives a fisherman greater satisfaction—the fishing itself (which more frequently than not is fraught with bitter disappointment), or the preparations for it.

It did not take us forty minutes to reach the village of Spassky, from where we were to start for the Koloksha. I found Sasha Kositsin by his Moskvich. Attired in striped pyjamas, he was attaching to the rear of the car a long, thin pole, with a small cross-piece at the end, to which iron rings were fastened in order to make greater noise and cause greater panic. This apparatus is used for beating the bushes and under-water branches, frightening the fish out and stirring up the water. Previously a net is tied to the bushes or branches, and the terrified fish dart into it.

‘Surely we are not going to fish with a net?’ I asked. ‘We decided to take rods.’

‘Yes, that’s right. But my father is a sceptic. He says that it is possible that we may catch something with rods, but he will take a net to be on the safe side. He’ll do it in the old man’s way, he says, with a net.’

Meanwhile the elder Kositsin appeared at the entrance to their timber cottage. He was a short, sturdy, blue-eyed man, with great vigour and briskness in his movements. He immediately pushed his son away from the job of tying on the pole, untied what had already been done, and began to fasten it again from the beginning, firmly and reliably, in his own, peasant fashion.

Armed with dung-forks and an old tin, Sasha and I set off to dig up worms. We went along a path through the orchard, which was humming with bees, then down a recently mown

meadow, which gave off a hot smell of fresh hay, to the kolkhoz piggery. Our conversation during the performance of so responsible a task, which did not permit any superfluous chatter, was limited to brief, expressive observations.

'Stop, here's a good heap.'

'No, that's fresh manure, we must find some rotted compost.'

'This is good.'

'Dig then.'

An evil stench rose up from the pile as our forks removed the top layer.

'Ah, that's a good pile. Aren't there really any worms?'

'There must be. I dug here last year.'

'Dig deeper, right down to the ground.'

'There they are, the darlings! There they are!'

Our hands began grubbing hurriedly in the manure, picking out the worms.

'Excellent worms!'

'Here is a whole colony of them. Look, how big and pink!'

'Put a little manure in the tin, so that they are comfortable, the darlings!'

'I think grass would be better.'

'Yes, grass, but put some manure too.'

A short period of panting, wordless labour.

'Look, what a worm, a beauty!'

'I knew they would be here. Look at this one!'

'Beauties!'

'Darlings!'

Two women passed not far away. They stopped for some time to gaze at two Muscovites—one in a straw hat, the other with a woman's kerchief tied round his head—digging with energy and zest in a heap of pig manure.

Meanwhile the loading of the car was continuing in front of the house. Pots and pans, forks, knives, spoons, onions, loaves of bread, potatoes, blankets, pails, and also some green-coloured bottles sealed with white wax, were carried out to the car.

Besides the basic fishing members of the party, that is—Sasha, his father Pavel Ivanovich and myself—Sasha's wife, Vera, a fair, beautiful woman from Moscow, and also his sister, the small, dark Lyusya, were somehow or other all



packed into the small car. When the question was raised, whether the women should both be taken on the expedition, Sasha put an end to the discussion by a short irrefutable argument:

‘And who will clean the fish, make the soup and wash the dishes?’

Finally we set off and Sasha’s mother waved to us from the steps. The village children ran behind in a troop until the car increased its speed and left them in a thick cloud of dust, raised not so much by the wheels as by the long pole which was dragged behind.

If anyone had been looking down from above, the blue Moskvich with the thin pole attached to it must have looked like some nimble little mouse with an unusually long tail. Now the mouse, emerging from the shade of the village trees, set off along a road across fields, darted into a side road, leaped out again, nosed along close beside a ditch, which it did not dare to jump over, cautiously ran over the ditch, turned to the right and merrily scurried along the dusty highway and into the village of Ratislovo, beneath the heavy, dark branches of century-old trees.

Here Sasha, who was at the wheel, slowed down at the village shop.

‘There are some more things to buy.’

No one asked him what else precisely we needed: perhaps bread, salt, or some more tinned foods.

'The girl serving there seemed familiar to me,' I said to Sasha, as we set off again. 'Who is she? She is young, but looks as though she has been through a lot.'

'Raya Vakholkina. Probably you were at school with her.'

Then out of the darkness of my memory stretching back almost twenty years there emerged the thin, grey-eyed face of a slender school-girl. She was always quiet and thoughtful, always more serious than a girl of fifteen should be, and by common consent was the prettiest girl in the class.

It always seems to ourselves that we are the same as we were fifteen or twenty years earlier. But then you meet a contemporary after many years, you do not recognise her, she does not recognise you, and it is as though you were looking into the mirror of time.

After Ratislovo the journey was more gay. Side-roads were more frequent, and there was liveliness in the variety of the fields. Pinkish-white buckwheat was followed by a blue lake of flax with white birches on the banks; after the blue came a deep-pink, red and almost shaggy riot of clover, and then again we were met by the waxy yellow and dry rustling of oats and the exotic mauve of fields of lupin.

A side-road led us steeply downhill. One could see that, not so very long before, streams of rain had run down its loamy ruts, leaving by every root which ran across the road small, smooth lumps of clay, little pebbles and rubbish.

Sasha kept a firm hold of the brakes all this time; then, evidently being well acquainted with the way, he released them and our small blue mouse scuttled out from the narrow, shadowed, semi-darkness of the road into such an expanse of sunlight, blue sky and level grass, like an outspread tablecloth, that involuntarily we shut our eyes for a moment, and when we opened them again, everything around seemed even more spacious and bright. This was the beginning of the Koloksha water-meadows.

These meadows were a shimmering mauve and lilac, in places they were bright yellow or a dim blue, but the golden light of the sun lay over all the different colours.

They had not yet begun the mowing on our side of the river, but on the other bank, at the foot of a steep hill, shaped like a hill in a legend, the kerchiefs and dresses of the women made

patches of colour, haycocks were scattered neatly over the field, and two completed stacks were a dull green.

The Moskvich swam on through the lush grass, hidden in it up to the windows, on a wave of flowers towards the spot where we guessed the river to be, though we could not yet see it. At the insistence of Pavel Ivanovich we drove on to a little promontory where a stream called Chernaya falls into the Koloksha.

The Chernaya is so entangled among meadows and thickets that it is with difficulty that it manages to force its way into open ground and become a little wider. In some places as much as five or six metres separate its steep and grassy banks. But even where it is five or six metres across a good third of the surface is shadowed by an overhanging bush, by the other bank water-lilies and duckweed float luxuriantly on the water. It is only in the centre that there is a strip of dark, clear water, something over a metre wide. If you manage to throw your line and bait over the water-plants, it will sink three metres (you would not expect such depth in such a small stream) and then all manner of unexpected things may happen.

The Koloksha is a rather more mature river. Even a twenty-five metre net would not be sufficient to barricade it, one would need a fifty-metre drag-net, bearing in mind that it will not be stretched straight across, but will bend in a semi-circle. It is covered with water-lilies along both banks, even more thickly on our side. We had to walk some distance to select a spot where each of us could throw in three lines without being crowded. It would have been impossible to cast beyond the lilies, the distance was too great.

I established myself in a quiet spot to the right of a flourishing bush of broom. The strip of water-lilies alongside the bank had a gap in it here, and I was already imagining the various fish of Koloksha, swimming along this free stretch near the bottom, journeying from one under-water thicket to another.

It is always doubly interesting to cast a line for the first time into an unknown stream. What will the fishing be like? What fish are lurking in the recesses among the roots of that deep, still pool? The surface fish, of course, are the same everywhere; in five minutes they have already grown accustomed to my presence near the broom, and dart hither and thither, intent on

their business. But every fisherman knows that he will not catch the fish which swim on the surface and which are visible to the eye, but those which hide themselves and lurk near the bottom. The float, lying on the quiet, seemingly motionless water, will stand on end and, remaining so for a fraction of time, will move, slightly tilted backwards. It moves on for half a metre, stops and moves back or to one side. A large fish is acting cautiously, and it is almost impossible to restrain oneself and not twitch the rod; however, it is essential to have restraint. The float is perfectly still and again lies on the water, as it lay before the bite. Can it really be that the fish has rejected it, that it only pricked itself on the hook and spat it out; can that be the end of it? But the float again stands up on end, it begins to twitch impatiently and to ripple the water, and suddenly it slips rapidly sideways down to the mysterious depths of the river, merging with the darkness.

But such a bite is a dream, and if you get such a one five or six times during the morning, you may count yourself a lucky fisherman. It happens much more frequently that, after the float has plunged boldly and decisively down, a yellowish little fish with brown spots, a ruff, will be found quivering on the hook; fishermen call it affectionately either the 'general', or the 'commandant', or the 'master', or simply by its name and patronymic 'Ersh Ershovich'.

Once I arrived in Leningrad by train from Tallinn before six in the morning. It was towards the end of May. In order to fill in the time before the offices opened, I took a walk through the city, and naturally soon found myself on the embankment of the Neva. Its wide surface was blue under the morning sky, sparkling and flecked with orange. Fishermen sat along the embankment. One of them was using a grandiose contrivance, which only by a stretch of language could be called a fishing-rod. Seven metres long, composed of several sections, this mighty rod at the bottom end was as big as the shaft of a cart. It would of course be impossible to hold it in one's hands, and the fisherman had shown some ingenuity. He had tied a string to the centre of the rod, and he pulled this if it was necessary to raise the rod. He fastened the other end of the string to an iron hook, which for some reason had been driven into the granite of the embankment. But even with the help of the string

it was not a simple matter to lift the contrivance, and the fisherman had to fling himself back as he pulled on the string.

Another fisherman adopted a different method. Instead of bait he had a heavy weight and some kind of wire frame fastened to his line. Small straps with hooks were attached to the frame, and all this he contrived to hurl out almost to the middle of the Neva.

The magnificence of the river and the proximity of the sea (for what fish might not come up from the Gulf of Finland?) aroused my curiosity. And now the huge float (a champagne bottle cork with a long white feather stuck in it) heeled over and slowly sank. In a moment the string was unwound from the iron hook, and the tackle began to be raised slowly. Excitement was intense, other fishermen hurried up and crowded round the happy man, who had had a bite. The Neva is deep even near the bank, but it was soon possible to see what was the cause of the excitement. It was this same 'general', 'commandant', or 'master', a ruff. Certainly it was a good-sized Neva ruff, a cut above one in a stream near Moscow, nevertheless it was no great prize.

Then the neighbouring fisherman with the wire frame began hurriedly, almost feverishly, to pull in his tackle from the depths of the Neva. Surely some marvellous fish must have come his way, far out from the bank.

'There he is!' the fisherman exclaimed, having finally drawn in the line and removed a ruff from the hook. 'You're caught, my dear sir, into the basket you go.'

Once in the winter we heard of some fabulous river for fish; apparently in one day thirty-three kilogrammes of fish were caught from a single hole in the ice. We set out there on a Sunday; we started in the evening, drove all night along a motorway, turned into a side road, whereupon every hundred metres the car got stuck in the fresh snow, then leaving the car in a small village we stumbled among the snow drifts two or three kilometres to the river, with some difficulty broke through the dark green March ice, and then with excitement lowered our lines . . .

'A bite!' shouted the first one to be lucky in a voice distorted with emotion. Everyone rushed to him. Out from the hole came a tiny ruff, no bigger than my little finger . . .

What was my excitement when I threw my first line into the gap between the water-lilies in the Koloksha!

And what was my surprise when the hook and plummet had not yet reached the bottom when already the float began to sink, as if I had fastened a heavy weight to the line, not a tiny lead pellet. And what was my delight when a moment later I removed from the hook my first reddish 'commandant' of the river Koloksha, covered with its characteristic slime.

Fishing expeditions are unique, just as games of chess or football matches are. Each fishing expedition has its own character, each has its climax and moment of greatest excitement; even ten years later you will not confuse one expedition with another. Just as football fans at the twentieth minute in the second half, when the score is 4-1 in favour of one side, say that the 'game is over', so the fisherman, as the sun sets, having landed fifty or so ruff, can say that his evening total has been determined.

But just as in the last moves in a game of chess and in the last minutes of a football match there may be a quite unexpected turn of affairs, so it may be when you make the final cast in a day's fishing.

As had happened fifty times before, my float immediately sank, and my hand mechanically performed the usual movement of winding in. But the taut line cut through the water in a very special way, and my heart leaped; this was it, the climax of the day's fishing! The fish made an attempt to dart to the right into the reeds, but the rod sprang back and brought the fish into the open water. It set off in circles, and as I gradually raised the rod, the circles came nearer and nearer the surface.

But instead of tiring and lying flat on the bright water, gasping for air and getting drunk from it, and thereupon growing weak and submissive and allowing itself to be drawn to the bank, my victim suddenly leaped half a metre out of the water and again plunged into the depths, and began to heave and to agitate the quiet evening river. Somewhere in the bottom of my heart there appeared a gnawing sensation of the inevitable outcome, I had a presentiment that I was not going to be successful in landing this prey, but my hands, not acquiescing, continued to play their part. I managed to lift the rod more and more steeply and to draw the fish to the bank.

It was a full-grown chub, at the height of its strength. The wide dark head was matched by the wide dark body, which gradually narrowed to the tail. The fins, looking as though made of red velvet, moved on the silvery-white belly. The long beautiful body of the fish lay unmoving near the surface of the water, resting and preparing to struggle afresh for the right to swim among the river plants, to dream replete among the dense roots, to warm itself in the midday sun of July and to leap nimbly from the water to catch big, fat dragonflies.

I had no net with me, for I did not reckon on catching such a fish. There was no sandy ridge near by, on which I might cautiously draw the chub. The bank was so steep that it was impossible to stretch down with my arm and try to catch hold of its gills or strike it on the head with a sharp huntsman's knife. Later by the camp-fire, in the course of a detailed, exhaustive and, above all, leisurely discussion of this event, the most correct course of all actions which were possible for me was pointed out. I should at all costs have kept the chub in the water (no matter if it went round in circles), and summoned Sasha to my help; he was fishing at about two hundred metres distance from me. If the situation was more critical, I should have taken a chance and slowly raised the fish with bending rod and line pulled taut. There would be small hope of success, but there was a possibility that the line would hold. But in fact I acted in the most incorrect, stupid and disgraceful manner. Seeing the chub on the surface of the water at my very feet, I took hold of the line—that most delicate thread, which is strong only in its length—and tried to draw it in with my hands. But I did not have to do this for long. Scarcely had I shortened the line, when there was a powerful blow of the tail on the water, and there remained in my hands only a fragment of high-quality line, prepared with such pains, tested with such hope!

All this from the moment of the bite to the final blow with the tail took only a few minutes; the plunging of the fish and its final splash merged into one, and Sasha shouted to me from afar:

‘What are you doing, preparing for a swim?’

My hands trembled and could not put a worm on the hook; besides, what sense was there in putting one on? Just to catch one more ruff, the fifty-second? I left the river and went away into the wide meadow.

Much had changed in the world around, while I had been sitting under my bush of broom. The sun was already setting and touched the distant forest, which grew on the ridge surrounding the meadows. Half the meadow on our side of the river was in the shadow of the forest, and one could already feel an evening coolness coming from that quarter. On the other side of the river long, distinct shadows of haycocks and ricks patterned the green floor of the mown field. The women who had been toiling in the meadow were on their way back to the village, making a many-coloured chain stretching up the slope of the hill. Some horses were wandering over the mown meadow, moving from light into shade, appearing now quite black, now a bright chestnut. A light sunset flush lay over everything, from the green grass up to the banks of white clouds. Quiet was flowing over the whole of nature.

Near our car (the shadow of the forest was just creeping up to it), a thin wisp of blue smoke was curling towards the sky. I went straight towards it through the tall grass, already beginning to grow damp.

Everyone had now gathered at our bivouac. Sasha, besides various small fish, had caught a big, dark bronze, thick-lipped tench.

'He was hooked, I felt it. I was just pulling him out, when he dived down into the depths, the rascal! My hands are still trembling. He's the first tench I've caught in my whole life. How much do you think he weighs? A kilogramme and a half? A kilo eight hundred grammes?'

The farsighted Pavel Ivanovich pulled out of his pocket a small spring-balance, looking as if it had been made at some prehistoric time, and fastened the fish to it. The spring creaked, the rusty iron finger on the scale showed a pound and a quarter.

'The balance is wrong,' Sasha said categorically. 'It is not possible that such a beauty, such a darling, such a rascal should weigh only half a kilo!'

For the time being Pavel Ivanovich was concealing his spoils in a pail under a net. He surveyed my pile of ruff with respect: 'A first-class fish for soup'; he turned over Sasha's perch and roach and admired these too: 'Added to Volodya's ruff, they will make fish soup—almost.' All his cunning was

hidden in this 'almost'. He removed the net from the pail, and we saw that it was almost full of fish—all big and equal in size, each one of them would have been an event for us, line anglers.

'Where did you get them, Grandpa?' Sasha said in surprise. Since he had his own children, he called his father 'Grandpa'. 'In the Chernaya?'

'Where else? I fished only below three bushes. I knew that my net would not fail me, my boy. Now during the night we ought to put a net across the Koloksha; rods are all very well, but there's no harm in having a net as well.'

Countless fish were loudly champing and snuffling like piglets everywhere among the reeds. We chose a suitable place so that part of the net should be among the water-lilies, part in clear water. I swam over to the other side, dragging the net on a rope. Evidently the evening air was beginning to grow chilly, for the water seemed quite hot. White scraps of steam, fastened to the black surface of the river, were wreathing and straining upwards, trying to break away from the water, float away into the meadows and settle over the flowers and grasses. We stretched out the net. I wound my end of the rope fairly loosely round a clump of sedge, so that in the morning I need not swim over to unwind it, but could twitch it loose.

In the meantime Sasha had pumped up a spare tyre and lowered it into the water.

'What's that for?'

'We have to bring some hay over from the other bank. We must have something to sleep on.'

We loaded a bundle of hay on the tyre and gently drew it over the water. The evening had quite closed in. The first green stars had appeared in the sky. Every now and again a fish would splash and leap up.

'That's enough hay, surely.'

'One more bundle. We shall sleep more softly.'

So once more we loaded on a fragrant bundle, its scent mingling with the faint smell of the mist, the pungent smell of sedge, and the strong aroma of mint along the bank. The red flame of the camp-fire shone out more brightly in the blue twilight; it was clear that Pavel Ivanovich had learned the art of fire-making when he worked as a forester in Zhuravlikha.

When we had finished transporting the hay over the river,

we bathed, washing off all the fragments of hay, and shivering went towards the fire. The fish soup was ready. It had been heated in a pail, suspended over the fire on stout alder stakes. Neatly spread out on a rug near the fire were gherkins, onions, garlic, sausage, boiled potatoes, and some tinned foods.

We drank in the country way, taking turns, from a thick glass tumbler, choking, wrinkling up our noses, and taking a long sniff at bread or gherkin. After our long time in the water and the transport of the hay, the warmth of the spirit was pleasant, and we were snug around the fire, oblivious of the fact that it was set in the midst of the limitless world, and that we were sitting under the open sky in a fresh breeze from the forest.

‘Vera, darling, where is the fish?’ Sasha suddenly cried, when she put before us a dish full of hot soup.

‘I flung away the fish into the grass. Why should you want it? All the goodness has been boiled away.’

‘My darling,’ Sasha groaned. ‘To pour out such goodness into the grass. We shall have to go and find it, you must show me where later.’

Before we had had a second round of drinks, a man in rubber boots and an old rubber raincoat came out of the darkness and approached the fire. Without asking who we were and what we were doing there, he squatted down by the fire, poked a bit of hot ash from it and lit up a home-made cigarette.

‘The mosquitoes don’t bother you?’ the old man asked severely, when he had his cigarette well alight, as though we were his guests and it was important for him to know whether the mosquitoes were annoying us.

‘No, we haven’t noticed them,’ Pavel Ivanovich answered for all of us.

‘There have been fewer this year. Ours is a high and healthy neighbourhood. Snakes, for example, we haven’t a single one. Our neighbourhood is quite free of such pests.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘Gorodishche. The village beyond the hill there. You can hear the dogs barking.’

‘And why are you walking through the meadows in the night-time?’

‘I have been setting my lines. In the morning I shall come and collect them. I may be lucky.’

‘What bait do you use?’

‘Frog. There are plenty of frogs in the grass here, and chub are fond of them. So that’s what I give them. I come each night and set my lines. But I don’t like sitting with a rod. Besides I have my farm-work in the day-time.’

He drank off a glass of vodka, spluttered, ate a gherkin but refused other food.

‘Perhaps you will use my hut over there, not far away. I am a herdsman. When the hay is carted away, the horses will graze here at night.’

We refused his offer of the hut. The old man got up, took a step away and immediately vanished in the darkness.

The fire gradually died down. While there was even one, feeble tongue of flame, quivering and clinging with all its strength to a burnt-out log, the darkness closed in and narrowed the circle, enveloping us from every side, but it did not venture to overwhelm completely that round morsel of space in which we sat. A flame ran along a log and almost leaped from it, when it came to the end, but it clung there and danced on one spot, then lengthened and ran back, stopped in the middle of the log, grew thin and was torn away from the wood and died in an instant, vanishing as though it had never been. And as soon as the fire vanished, immediately the dark walls and the dark ceiling collapsed round us. The wide starry sky, the misty distance of the meadows, silvery from the stars, became light and visible. Even the dim outline of the hill, which rose up above the river, could be guessed at, merely because there was in that quarter a starless, black space.

Settling down in the hay, we covered ourselves with blankets and sacking, but for a long while yet gazed up at the fathomless heavens and the shimmering stars, for a long while yet we listened to the night—the cry of a corncrake running through the grass close by our heads, the clear snorting of horses on the other bank, the faint singing of girls in the village of Seminsky or Turygino, the champing and splashing of a fish.

Only Pavel Ivanovich, in true peasant fashion, as soon as he lay his head on his pillow, sank immediately into a dead sleep, punctuated by snores and an occasional indistinct muttering.

The Eighteenth—the Twenty-second Day

We spent these days in Olepino. But the village of Olepino, its inhabitants and surroundings will be the subject of a separate book, which I fully intend to write some day.

I must merely say that our fishing expedition with Petrukha did not take place. He had died not long before our arrival.

‘He left you his fishing-rods. They are standing out at the back.’

I went outside and there indeed I found the two rods, which I knew so well. They were in perfect order. The village boys had not even cut off the hooks, to which dried remnants of bait were still adhering, fixed on to them at some time by Petrukha’s unfastidious fingers.

The Twenty-third Day

If you look along the left side of our village, you will see a field of rye, and in the distance beyond it the dark strip of the Samoilovsky forest. This forest runs down into a valley to the river Eza. Blue hills rise up beyond it and disappear from view in a haze, but they can be seen quite clearly from our church belfry.

True, it is a long time since I have climbed up the belfry, partly because the steps have crumbled away, so that I do not know how these distances beyond the forest would now appear to me. The sight of them has remained from my childhood. At some time, when I was small, I looked out in that direction, and the blue hills have been etched for ever in my memory.

That region was too far for us to reach, so that the hills were able to keep their fairy-tale inviolability. On specially bright, sunny days it was possible to distinguish in the blue haze the little white dots of belfries. When I asked my father what belfries these were, he would answer:

'Who can tell? Suzdal is in that direction, perhaps they are Suzdal churches!'

I understand now that he was a dreamer, and that he had a great desire that distant Suzdal should be visible from our village.

The firs of the Samoilovsky forest were to save us from the rain. A storm cloud was close on our heels. We saw how my native village was blotted out behind us by rain, as a muslin curtain was drawn across it; this muslin had one end fastened to an oncoming cloud, the other end was dragged over the ground, brushing against trees, houses and fences. Now it was dragging over a field of rye, and evidently it was not so light and airy, for the rye lay down before it, as though someone were smoothing and caressing it with a rough, heavy hand, as a peasant smooths the unruly hair of his small boy.

The growing noise only encouraged us, and we ran on until

we were overtaken, and a torrent of warm July rain poured down on our shoulders.

There was no point in running any more—you cannot run races with the rain. And if you have been ducked in water, a second ducking won't make you any wetter.

The downpour came in waves. One wave passed on and the sun appeared. The earth was drowned in a golden mist. Steam rose from us, our backs, our shoes and our rucksacks. Then a cloud overtook us again. The road became slippery, and it was difficult to walk. Sticky mud clung to our shoes, and we were glad when the forest began, and there was thick grass on both sides of the path.

Serega had learned from his father how to imitate bird-song, and he now entertained us by collecting all the cuckoos from the whole of the Samoilovsky forest. At first he sang cuckoo several times without effect. The birds were struck dumb by the rain and did not answer. Then from far away we heard an answering 'cuckoo', then from another direction, then from behind. Serega continued to call them perseveringly, and we heard the deceived cuckoos coming nearer and nearer. The circle grew smaller and finally we heard a rustling and the noise of wings in the bushes on all sides. The birds flew over the track and over our heads in bewilderment and perplexity. Serega then decided to summon the hazel-grouse, but another downpour interfered with this enterprise.

Although the rain was warm, we were soaked to the skin and began to feel chilly. Moreover, the rain had turned to a light drizzle and the sky was covered by a dense grey mist. The tops of the firs tore and broke it, and were left with damp, white tufts clinging to them. Such weather would not quickly change.

We approached the village of Kornevo from the back-yards. For some time we looked for the common pasture, hoping to come upon the road; but there was no pasture, and finally we ventured to open a gate into a garden and went past beds of onions (I can see them now—dull green fleshy stalks with big drops of rain on them), but the garden ended in the log wall of a yard and the gate was locked. In answer to our knock, it opened a little way and a fat piglet darted out with a boy in pursuit. The boy paid no attention to us and began to

chase the piglet round the onion-beds. Meanwhile we went through the yard, which was full of wet mire and we had to step on bricks which had been thrown down here and there. So we found ourselves in the village.

We chose the widest doorway and huddled in it. While we were moving, we felt warmer, but now our lips turned blue, and dry clothing in a warm room began to seem the height of human blessedness on earth.

But the day was still young, so that we had a longer period of discomfort ahead of us than lay behind.

We could see from end to end of the village, which was green and empty, like a football field at half-time. Only geese and hens were strutting about, and that was a bad sign. During a short shower the hens hide themselves and wait, but if they come out into the rain it means that it is useless to wait.

But now we saw a jeep making its way through the village, frightening the hens and geese, splashing through the puddles and throwing up clods of mud. It was about to speed past and disappear, when Serega, long-legged and frozen, rushed in front of it, like a goalkeeper defending the top left corner of the goal.

The jeep stopped, and in our condition we did not care in the least where it was going, nor for what purpose. Besides the driver, a blond young man in a check shirt, there were two other passengers like ourselves, an old man and a middle-aged woman with a placid face. It appeared that the driver was born for just such roads; he evidently enjoyed turning the wheel sharply, when the car slipped sideways across the road and began to slide down a steep slope, or when at a critical point on a hill he had to set the car obliquely to clamber up a slippery bank. The engine groaned and streams of mud were thrown up by the wheels and pattered on the roof.

'So you are from Moscow,' the driver guessed correctly. 'Well, we have everything here too, just as in Moscow, except that the houses are not so high, and the roads are muddier. Be grateful that you came across my jeep. At the present time all the lorries within a radius of a hundred kilometres are stuck along the roads where the rain caught them. They can't move. The road is open only to us.' And he boldly pressed down the accelerator, as though by this movement he were directly

pushing the car forward. 'It's all right, it's a good engine.'
'Evidently you're a first-class driver too!'

The lad frowned.

'Anyone can drive. In our driving-school there was one duffer, the instructors gave him up. I said: "Let me show him, it's not possible that he shouldn't learn, even bears can learn it all." I got him through his training. So now he too is stranded along the road somewhere.'

The car dashed through hamlets and villages. This was all the region of my blue hills, now wrapped in a watery haze.

Suddenly the old man began to speak.

'Is it true that in Moscow there are some shops which deliver goods to your home? Whatever you need—we'll send it, they say, certainly right away.'

'That's nothing, Grandpa,' the driver broke in. 'You can go into a shop, and there are no salesmen, you take what you want and go.'

'Don't talk nonsense!' the old man said angrily. 'You're too young to laugh at your elders. And the question doesn't concern you.'

The woman turned out to be the most interesting talker, although we had to struggle to draw her into the conversation. She looked like a simple kolkhoz worker, or at most a factory worker, but it turned out that she was a deputy to the Supreme Soviet. We had never had the chance before of talking with a deputy about her work, and we bombarded her with questions, trying to elicit the smallest details. This is what she told us.

Praskovya Ivanovna was born in the country, and when she was twelve she was left an orphan; both her father and mother died of cholera within an hour. The girl, Pasha, became a children's nurse, looking after other people's children, and she was unhappy. So she went to work at a factory owned by Ivan Bazhenov. Since that time thirty years have passed. The factory lost its owner, but did not decline because of that. On the contrary, in place of the single, shabby building new, beautiful workshops with large windows were constructed. These years were not uneventful for Praskovya Ivanovna. She became the mother of four children, now grown up, and was widowed, for her husband died young.

A profession leaves its mark. A weaver in charge of several

looms must not bustle, make unnecessary movements or become agitated. Praskovya Ivanovna was a calm, thoughtful woman. At election meetings and in talks with the electors she heard that 'the people will elect their best sons and daughters', though she could not understand why she was one of these. She also heard that she must 'serve the people and justify their trust', but it seemed to her that they could not be speaking of her, but of someone else, and that other person must serve the people, because she, Praskovya Ivanovna, did not know how that was done.

It was only on that first spring morning that she realised that all this referred to her, that now she was a deputy and that she would be held accountable.

'What am I doing lying here?' she thought to herself. 'Have I time now to lie about?'

She quickly got up, splashed her face with cold water, dressed, and only then noticed that the settlement was still asleep, and there was nothing for her yet to do. The new, recently installed telephone was silent. The light of a spring morning flooded in at the window.

The room where the deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR was to interview her visitors was located in a separate small stone house, and was very tiny. Praskovya Ivanovna entered it and looked round in a proprietary manner. 'A jug of water, a telephone, a big table, warmth—but what a kennel! If two or three people come at once, they won't have room to turn round. And everything can be heard from the corridor, it will be impossible to have an intimate talk.'

Her first thought was to go herself to the director of the factory (he might perhaps be willing to see her?) and talk with him about accommodation. She had already put on her scarf, when she laughed to herself, sat down at the table and picked up the telephone.

'Put me through to the director. Sergei Fedorovich? You don't recognise me? Will you come to my room? There is a small matter to discuss . . .'

She and the director together surveyed the next room, discussed where to put up a partition, how best to arrange matters.

'I will come back with you to the factory,' Praskovya

Ivanovna said to the director. 'I only just looked in here. I have no business to see to yet.'

She had hardly said this, when an old woman with a wrinkled face and blinking eyes peered in at the door.

'Have I come to the right room?' the old woman quavered, and Praskovya Ivanovna recognised that this was her first visitor.

'Sergei Fedorovich,' she asked the director softly. 'Are there any instructions for a deputy, how to conduct business and so on?'

'Hardly,' the director smiled. 'It is not a case for instructions, but for personal initiative. I wish you success.' He went out, leaving Praskovya Ivanovna to deal with the situation.

'Where have you come from, granny?'

'From Sudogda, my dear. I want a document. Because I am being turned out.'

Praskovya Ivanovna wanted to ask her what sort of document and who was turning her out, but the old woman was already pouring out her woes, and it was difficult to stop her.

'I'm not used to the towns. I don't like the town, drat it. It was my daughter who lived in the town, and my little ones, my grandchildren too, of course. Well, my dear, we are all in God's hand. She died, my daughter, and the children were left. I packed up and moved to be with them. For someone had to look after them.'

'You were quite right, Granny, to move in with them.'

'Right it may be, but they are turning me out.'

'Who? Where from?'

'From the house. It is not registered in my name, they say, but in my daughter's. And my daughter has died. They need the house, and I am old, what can I say to them, and they are turning me out.'

'It can't be so,' Praskovya Ivanovna exclaimed. 'What about the children?'

'The children will be taken into a children's home, they say. But will strangers look after them better than their own Granny? And they will take away my last happiness, separating me from my grandchildren. They need the house, you see.'

Praskovya Ivanovna's mind was in a turmoil. This was her first petitioner, and she had no confidence as yet in her powers.

Besides, people tell all kinds of stories, although it did not seem likely in this case. What was she to believe? So she said calmly:

‘Go home now, Granny. I will take the matter up. I will look into it thoroughly and will see that you are not treated unfairly. Go home now.’

The old woman lingered by the door and said timidly:

‘So you won’t give me any document?’

She went away, evidently thinking that her visit had been fruitless.

Soon afterwards Praskovya Ivanovna was visited by the headmaster of the school. He came to invite her to a meeting of parents.

‘Here now is Praskovya Ivanovna,’ he said to the parents. ‘For several years I have been trying to get the lighting of the school improved, and I have achieved nothing at all. As a consequence the children’s eyesight may be damaged. Let us ask Praskovya Ivanovna to help us.’

She telephoned to the director of the factory.

‘Sergei Fedorovich, why do you treat the schoolchildren so badly? Their eyesight will be ruined. You must give them more light.’

Sergei Fedorovich laughed.

‘Praskovya Ivanovna, I am not the Lord of the Sabbath, to increase or diminish the light. There is need of a transformer. And some kilometres of wire. I haven’t got this. If you have taken the matter up, this is my advice: summon the medical inspectors and get them to make a report, then you may get somewhere.’

Praskovya Ivanovna set to work as a weaving instructor. This did not tie her to the workshop, and she could leave the factory, if her duties as deputy required it.

‘I try very hard,’ a young girl with black eyes and dimples in her cheeks said to her, ‘but I can’t get on with it.’

‘Don’t try so hard, my dear,’ Praskovya told her. ‘You can try when you have learned how to do it. But now don’t hurry, work slowly and calmly, and it will go all right.’

‘Aunt Pasha, you are wanted on the phone!’ came a voice from the other end of the shop.

The headmaster of the school spoke to her, gasping with agitation.

‘Now we’ve done it! An inspection commission has been here,

and the school is to be closed. In three weeks' time. Do something to help us, Praskovya Ivanovna.'

She had difficulty in persuading the commission not to close the school. She had to promise that good lighting would be installed immediately.

The chairman of the district council listened to her with a smile.

'There was hardly need to come to Vladimir for that! Can't the director deal with the matter himself? What nonsense! It's only a matter of increasing the voltage.'

'It seems that something else is required. I don't know anything about electricity, but something has to be ordered from Moscow.'

The chairman laughed.

'You exaggerate! I will phone the director. We'll see to it.'

'No.' Praskovya Ivanovna opened the door and called in a man from the waiting-room. 'I've brought the head of the electricity department with me in case of need. Please explain, Ivan Pavlovich, what is needed for the lighting of the school.'

The following day a request was sent to the Council of Ministers. Within a few weeks the light streamed out from the windows of the school in quite a new way.

Time passed. At any time of the year people came to Praskovya Ivanovna to tell her their worries and troubles. Once again, when she was in Moscow at a meeting of the Supreme Soviet, she asked whether there were not any instructions for a deputy. Again she was told that there were none, it was just a question of finding out the truth. What a variety of requests were made to her!

'My husband has disappeared,' a factory worker said in tears. 'Can you find him for me, the scoundrel? The children are left on my hands. He must be earning somewhere, make him pay what he owes me.'

'I'll find him,' Praskovya Ivanovna pacified the woman. 'Don't cry, I'll find him if he's at the bottom of the sea.'

So a correspondence began. The wretch who had abandoned his family was tracked from town to town—Smolensk, Gomel, Baranovici. In one town he had been a porter, in another—a labourer. Finally a reply came from Kaliningrad district: 'A certain Grigory is working in a kolkhoz. Deduction from his

pay has been made in favour of the plaintiff—740 kilos of grain and 1,100 roubles.’

But sometimes inquiries led to a different result. ‘The guilt of Samokhvalov in embezzling public money has been confirmed. There are no grounds for an appeal.’

‘And how his wife wept! How she beat her breast! Evidently you can’t always trust a person’s tears.’

After some experience Praskovya Ivanovna realised that kindness is one thing, and the facts of the cases another. Before helping a person, you must find out whether he deserves the help.

A strapping man with a red face came to her, wanting to be given work at the factory and a plot of land for a house.

‘If you help me to be taken on, I shall be eternally grateful. The director won’t give me a plain answer—in short, there’s a hitch.’

‘You’ve left a kolkhoz?’

‘Yes, there have been quarrels in my family. You know very well, such things do happen. I can’t live with my wife any more.’

‘All right. Come back later.’

Trofim did come back, and asked what progress she had made.

‘Don’t be in too much of a hurry,’ Praskovya Ivanovna looked at him sternly. ‘I have visited your kolkhoz.’

Trofim’s red face took on a bluish tinge.

‘You quitted,’ Praskovya now spoke accusingly. ‘You are looking for a more comfortable niche. You are lying, aren’t you? You’ll get no help from the Soviet authorities.’

She does not receive only begging letters. Almost half of her post is made up of letters of thanks for help and sympathy. She has hundreds of such letters. She will never forget the first letter of thanks she received from her first visitor, the old woman from Sudogda.

‘I have to tell you that they have left me in peace with my grandchildren in the same house. And I can live here till the end of my days. Thank you, my dear . . .’

The jeep drove into a large village. The long, straight village street was even muddier than the road in the open country and the forest. A cart, which made way for us, sank up to the

hub in slush. In spite of the soft surface of the road, the car shook and lurched as though there were tree-stumps hidden under the mud.

‘That’s it, then, we’ve arrived,’ the driver announced. ‘I told you, just like Moscow, only the houses are not so high, and the asphalt is stickier. Where do you want to go? To the district committee or to a tea-room?’

‘No, to the Kolkhoznik House. We must get dried.’

In the Kolkhoznik House there was only one available bed. Serega was allotted this, and we two were billeted in a house nearby. Here we found ourselves in a little storeroom with a small square window and a huge number of bottles and phials on the floor. The owner of the house was a veterinary surgeon.

The Twenty-fourth Day

When we woke during the night, we listened . . . What a din! There was a beating on the iron roof, a softer drumming on the boarded roof of the shed, and a splashing as when a baby beats the palms of his small hands on the earth and the puddles. The morning was like evening twilight, July was like autumn.

After breakfast our company gathered in full strength to discuss what we were to do: it would be boring to sit indoors the whole day and look at the streaming windows, but to walk on was impossible. We wanted to go to two villages, one three kilometres away, the other—seven.

Serega and Rosa refused to walk there in the rain. For the first time there was mutiny in the camp.

‘What if I procure long raincoats?’

‘Where are you to get them? Surely you haven’t got relations here too.’

‘At the police-station, of course. Where else could there be surplus raincoats!’

Three figures, wrapped in tarpaulins, frightened away the rain, for it suddenly became intermittent. A glimpse of blue sky appeared on the horizon in the low, grey mist. The wind tore the edges apart, and made it wider and wider. The country around became distinct, as when a child traces a picture. It grew hot, and we had to take off our raincoats and carry them.

We came to the village of Kobelikha. Now from time immemorial Nebilovsky district has supplied shepherds for almost the whole of central Russia. So it is here, in these parts that the famous Vladimir hornblowers live. Kobelikha was famed above all other villages for its hornblowers, and that is why we were anxious to go there. We would ask them to play us two or three songs. That was our aim.

Our path led us now through meadows beside a stream, now through thick woodland, and now over fields of buckwheat. Everywhere it was pleasant for walking. In the meadows we

came upon hummocks thickly covered with pinks, little purple islands among the green. In the woods huge wood campanulas grew right beside the path; each bell was almost the size of a hen's egg. There is no need to speak of the buckwheat; it was in flower, and the very air above it seemed to be flushed pink.

There is a proverbial saying which is quite true: 'in summer, rain for two days—dry in an hour; in autumn, rain for an hour—dry in two weeks.' Now it was summer, and while we were walking to Kobelikha the path and the grass were dried by the wind, only the earth itself was black and crumbly.

After rain it is easy to weed, and the women of Kobelikha were making use of the opportunity. They were all out in the fields weeding among the onions. There were wide fields of onions here.

'Oh yes, we have got our living from onions all down the ages,' a woman told us as we passed. Straightening her back, she pushed her hair from her face with the back of her hand, for her fingers were covered with sticky earth. She watched us go and bent again to her task.

The houses of Kobelikha are stretched out in two rows towards the river Koloksha, but they come to an end at the top of a steep, grassy hill, not venturing to run down to the riverside meadow.

Above one house, or rather the garden of one house, a swarm of bees was preparing to fly away. The buzzing could be heard from quite a distance. The scattered cloud of the swarm swirled around, becoming smaller, but denser and blacker all the time.

'Manka, why do you stand there gaping?' an old man called from a neighbouring house. 'Run and find Katerina. Tell her that the swarm is flying away, and meanwhile I will raise a clatter.'

Manka, a twelve-year-old girl, ran off through the village, and the old man went into the house and returned with a pail and stick. It is well known that any kind of noise alarms the bees and they hasten to settle and establish themselves close by. But the old man did not have time to make a clatter. While he was inside the house, the swarm swirled round for the last time and flew off towards the sun. The old man watched them go, putting his hand to his eyes, and still holding the pail.

'So they've gone. Katerina will be annoyed! Well, they will

be a windfall for somebody. Or they'll be off into the forest and settle in a hollow tree.'

Near the kolkhoz office the kolkhoz workers were sitting around on the grass or on logs. We went and joined them. A lorry laden with women and girls drove up. Together with them our peasants moved into the building.

The chairman stood behind a table covered with a red cloth and tapped with his pencil against the ink-pot. We were pleased that he began, not with a discourse on the international situation as is the usual way at all meetings, but with the business in hand: 'Tomorrow we begin the haymaking! Let us decide the question, where to begin.'

A hubbub arose. Everyone wanted to express his opinion. It is not easy to get kolkhoz workers to make speeches on any general question. But if it is a question of beginning with this meadow or that, a kolkhoznik will not sit dumb, each one is an expert and a specialist.

This question was decided, but it appeared that half the people had not got scythes.

'Are there none in the village shop?'

Derisive voices were heard. 'In the village shop! All that's been brought to the village shop for the haymaking is a box of nails and some gate-hinges.'

The meeting resolved to dispatch a man to Moscow for scythes.

'There is another thing we must settle. Many people do not do the work conscientiously, they cut off the tips, but do not make a clean sweep. What shall we do with such people? Make them scythe over again, or pay them only fifty percent for their work? In short, how shall we make them feel it—in their pockets or on their backs?'

'Don't be too hasty!' one kolkhoznik shouted and then got to his feet. 'It is true that the grass is not cut right down, but what's the reason? You must look at the tools, and see what implement each of us is given. It may all be a matter of the tools.'

This speech, meaning that the fault is not always attached to the wielder of the scythe but to the scythe itself, made a strong impression. The chairman had to tap on the ink-pot again.

'You use these same tools on your own plots, and with what results? Not a single little blade of grass is left.'

‘Yes, on our own plots our only thought is for cutting the grass, but on the kolkhoz strips we are thinking also of the pay.’

Then they began to read out long lists of kolkhozniks divided into brigades. Meanwhile I shall have time to say why the strip system in haymaking does not commend itself to me.

From the distant past the haymaking has been the favourite work and the favourite season in the village. This was because it was done jointly, it united everybody and made them friends. All the rest of the year the peasant toiled on his own piece of land, but for the haymaking the whole village came out to one place, they stood one behind another, vied with one another, and during the intervals of rest they jested as though it were a holiday. At midday all the women too came out to turn the hay, and they sang as they went home to the village. But now it has been decided to organise this most collectivised, most friendly and unifying work in a different manner: each man is to be allotted his strip, where he will work alone.

This system is regarded as more profitable, but while we gain in one way, we lose in another, in the spiritual way, which is no less important. The system was introduced so that not a single blade should be left uncut. But in the old days, when the work was collective, there used not to be any scrap of hay left in the meadows.

The meeting continued.

‘As you remember, we sent a letter to Grandfather Mahmud Aivazov to ask him if it is true that he is one hundred and forty-seven years old.’

The kolkhozniks remembered the letter and there was a stir of interest.

‘Here is the reply from Grandfather Mahmud,’ and the chairman began to read a letter, in which the Azerbaijani ancient expressed his thanks for their interest and wished them success.

It was clear that he had not written himself, but that someone had written for him in a dry, official style. But this was a pleasant and touching incident. The kolkhozniks had been interested, they had written a letter, received an answer, and all this was done at a kolkhoz meeting. There was something warm and friendly in this. It was nice too that the chairman referred to

the old man as Grandfather Mahmud, and not Mahomet Ivanovich Aivazov.

At the beginning of the meeting we had sent the chairman a note, and he now made an announcement:

'Here is another matter. Some persons have come here, who are interested in our hornblowers. So may we request those of you who have a horn to go out with them and give a demonstration.'

The meeting was concluded and the people flocked out. But fifteen or so peasants remained behind, with whom we talked without the assistance of the chairman.

'Yes, there were trumpeters among us, there were! The Shibrovs in the old days went to the coronation, to play for the Tsar.'

'Where are they now?'

'They're dead. Their son is here. He's an expert too. Vanka, run and fetch Shibrov.'

'Then there was Petrukha Guzhov. He played to Gorky in Moscow. Whether it's true or not, but Gorky wept, so they say. He gave a gift to Petrukha, and Petrukha gave him a horn.'

'Where is your Petrukha?'

'He lives in Noginsk. There were three brothers, all of them trumpeters. Ivan is now a colonel, he's probably forgotten what a horn is like, but Pavlukha is here. Vaska, bring Pavlukha back, and tell him to bring his horn.'

'The Belov brothers, they played over the wireless in Moscow! There were others too. But many were killed in the war.'

'Does anyone play now?'

'Some do occasionally—Korkin and Shishkin. Many more would play, but they haven't got the teeth for it, they're too old.'

'What difference do teeth make?'

'Oh, teeth are most important. The breath has to be let out in a special way, without teeth it can't be done.'

'Take my case,' a man of about forty broke in. His big, sad eyes looked strange in his unshaven face. 'My tooth here was knocked out by a shell splinter in the war.' He tapped with a tobacco-stained finger on his yellow front teeth. 'I returned from the war and took up my old job again. But what sort of a shepherd was I without a horn? Well, I had a horn, it had

waited for its master all through the war. I took it up, I blew and I puffed, but I couldn't play it. Was it because of my tooth, I thought. I cut a bit of wood from a tree, planed it smooth and put it in my mouth instead of a tooth. And it did the trick. So I carry it in my pocket—my wooden tooth. I play, then wrap it up and back it goes in my pocket.

'Yes, in the old days we used to assemble in Lezhnev on Thursdays. We shepherds would come together, crowds of us, from the different villages. The hornblowers would sit in a row, a hundred and twenty of us, and play. Shepherds are good for nothing without horns. The farmers from the villages around walked along the rows, listened and picked their choice. There was quarrelling to get a good player, it would almost come to blows. There was more pay too for a good player, because the women love our music. You would begin to play a song in the morning, the sound carries a long way over the dewy meadows. The women wake up at once and go out to the milking, and you keep on playing. It is pleasant, and really beautiful too. It is possible of course to play on a bottle, many people do, but I have heard a donkey bray, and a donkey makes a more beautiful noise, I swear it.' Everybody laughed. 'But after all you must make some sound. You can't be a shepherd without that.'

'Won't you play for us? I have not heard the sound since childhood, and these people,' I indicated my companions, 'have never heard it at all.'

'Not alone I can't, you need several horns together. None of us have played for a long time. Besides we haven't the teeth.'

'What about the young men?'

'They're no good! None of them can do it. And there aren't the horns any more. There used to be a craftsman living close by. He would make you a horn of any wood you like! But now it's all finished.'

Meanwhile some horns were brought in. I held one in my hands, a simple instrument made of a piece of palm-wood. In length it was no more than eighteen inches. Its width at the narrow end was about the size of my first finger, and the other end was about the size of the bottom of a bottle, perhaps a little narrower. It had small holes along it, and here and there it had some carved ornamentation. In the course of years it had been

polished to a dark brown. The sounds pouring from such a wooden instrument can astonish people abroad (the Vladimir hornblowers have been to London!), they reduced Gorky to tears, and they have brought delight to Russian peasant women, because in the beauty of the sound, its tone and its strangeness there is nothing at all like it.

Shibrov put the horn to the corner of his mouth, stood up, blew till he turned red in the face, then blew again more strongly, until it seemed that he must become the deepest possible shade of purple before he got any sound from it, and when he did finally do this, it was nothing but a hoarse groan.

'Wait a bit, something must have got inside it. And we must moisten it, it's easier when it's wet!'

It was quite true, there was something inside the horn. It was cleaned out with a straw, and a dead cockroach was found inside. A pail of water was brought in, and they began to dip the horns in it. One after another the former hornblowers tried to play a song, but only snatches of tunes came from the wood, quite unmusical, harsh sounds. And when they tried in concert, four of them together, there was such a cacophony, that one would even prefer American jazz.

'No, it's no good, evidently. We're quite out of practice. Yes, and we haven't got the teeth. We've quite lost it.'

Here I must make a leap of several days forward and tell how we did nevertheless hear the genuine playing of a Vladimir hornblower. We were then near Suzdal. Serega had remained behind to make some sketches of the town, and we had gone to look at Kideksha. It is well known that four kilometres from Suzdal, just where the Kamenka flows into the Nerl, there stands on a green bank the most ancient white stone edifice of North-East Rus, the church dedicated to Boris and Gleb. Yury Dolgoruky buried there his daughter Ephrosinya, his son Boris and his wife Marya.

We found the church not only preserved, but restored and in excellent condition, as though it had been built in 1952, not 1152. Freshly white-washed, it stood like a toy among the green meadows, reflected in the quiet, clear Nerl. There was a wide view from the church. A low wooden bridge spanned the river immediately below us; occasionally lorries crept cautiously over it.

The day was coming to an end and a storm-cloud was rolling up. It became overcast, and only the church stood out even more clearly against the background of the threatening sky. Have you noticed how the china holders on telegraph poles gleam brightly when a storm is approaching? And here was no china holder but a big and beautiful building.

As always before rain, the world grew quiet. At such a time a chance sound in a neighbouring village—the clatter of a pail at the well, the squawking of a goose, the creaking of a cart-wheel—can be heard by everyone over a big distance.

At such a quiet moment a horn began to sound from beyond the river Nerl. It seemed to be coming from quite close by, from behind the hill. We should only have to run across the bridge and up the hill, and we should see immediately who was playing.

We crossed the river by the plank bridge, and trying to keep the direction (for the sound of the horn had ceased), we set off across the meadows. Beyond the hill we found a wide and deep ravine. A quantity of winding channels had been formed by the rain in the clay of the slopes, and the bed of these was sprinkled with small, many-coloured pebbles. All around there were the tracks of cows, sheep and goats. On the right the ravine widened out to meet the Nerl, on the left it was lost in bushes and led to distant woods. We set off to the left.

Someone had torn the storm-cloud into fragments, like an unpleasant letter, and cast them into the wind. These were now scurrying over the sky, somersaulting and chasing one another. A few drops fell, but there was no need to fear a heavy down-pour, and it became noticeably lighter.

Kideksha and the onion domes and cupolas of Suzdal beyond had gone away from us as though we held binoculars the wrong way round. They stood out like sugar toys under the cover of a dark cloud.

We had gone three kilometres from Kideksha, but had met no cattle, and as we went deeper into the dense thicket, we could no longer see more than ten paces around us. When we came to the end of the thicket, we saw a pine wood directly in front of us, and to the left a field of rye and the thatched roofs of an unknown hamlet.

We should probably have decided to spend the night there,

because the evening was coming on, when the horn sounded again, this time in the ravine behind us. A quarter of an hour later, from a hill-top we beheld this picture: through the twilight a man in a tarpaulin coat and cap was walking slowly over the hillside; he walked slowly, not looking back, and behind him just as slowly moved his herd, scattered over the pasture.

Our appearance was a surprise to the shepherd, for there was no path or road near by.

'You have lost your way? You are making for Suzdal?'

'Yes, but we are not lost. We heard the horn, and it was so beautiful that we turned aside to listen. We've been walking and walking, but could not find the horn.'

The shepherd laughed and glanced at his bag, from which the end of a palm horn was sticking out.

'What, do you like our music?'

'How can we like it, if we have never heard it? It was curiosity which brought us.'

As we talked, we walked on in front of the herd. The shepherd was anxious to reach the village before sunset, but the rain started to come down heavily, and he suggested that we take shelter among the bushes. We sat down on the damp grass.

'Never mind,' our new acquaintance said jokingly (his name was Vasily Ivanovich Sholokhov). 'The fox took shelter under a harrow; "not every drop will get through", she said. It won't be much. The biggest cloud has passed over.'

Among the bushes, it was quite still; the smoke from Sholokhov's cigarette hung in the air, as if we had been indoors.

'I have been a shepherd since I was eight,' Vasily Ivanovich told us. 'I would not take any other work. And I have played my horn in Moscow.'

'Where?'

'In the House of Scholars and the House of Writers, and in various halls and theatres. We had a very good reception. It seems that people had grown tired of violins, and our instruments took their fancy, just as one enjoys eating black bread after too many sweet biscuits.'

'How did you get to Moscow?'

'That is a long story'. He pressed his cigarette stub into the ground, rubbed his fingers and stood up. 'Let's move on, I will

tell you on the way, it's getting late. I was a lad, when I was taken for the army. I was homesick, and I sent a letter asking to be sent my horn; when I played that, I should feel better. So one day, when the company had halted for a rest, I took my instrument from my knapsack and began to play. What a stir! Everyone came running up to listen, and I took no notice, I went on playing. Suddenly they all stood aside, the commissar was approaching. He listened, took my horn and turned it over in his hands. "What is it? Where did you get it?" I told him that I had had it sent from home. "Have you fellow-countrymen, who know how to play?" I gave him some names, and they too sent home for their horns, and we formed a quartet. Whenever there was a concert, we were invited to perform. Meanwhile the commissar sent to Moscow for a musician, Seversky, to be our teacher. How he put us through our paces! He made us play the same note seventy times over. During manoeuvres our unit was visited by Voroshilov and Budenny. Well, of course a celebration concert was organised. We went up on the platform and saw them seated in the front row. Our knees knocked together, but our fears soon passed. When you are actually doing something, you can't be afraid. We played, and they, Voroshilov and Budenny, laughed, they held their sides with laughter! After that we were invited to Moscow, and for two years we performed at concerts. We had a better reception than Lemeshev or Kozlovsky. I might have remained a performer—it brings in the money. But I was drawn back home, to my own countryside.'

'Are you the only hornblower in the district?'

'No, there are a few others. Not long ago there was a festival of amateur artists, and we were invited. A well-known musician was present, and he liked our playing. He took us off to a restaurant, and we drank and played some more. It pleased him very much. He said: "I'll bring you to Moscow, lads. Everyone must hear you or else you'll die, and that will be the end of it. We'll have records made. We'll make a film, so that there may be a record for posterity."'

'And what happened?'

'It all ended stupidly. Laughable, you might say. He handed round money for travel expenses, and we went and spent the money on drink. So then we felt awkward and ashamed, and

dispersed back to our villages. It would be hard to collect us together again. Or perhaps some did not drink the money, but felt reluctant to spend it. After all it was free money, fallen from the sky so to speak. What shall I play you now?’

Vasily Ivanovich began to play a merry dance tune. He played very well, but it must be admitted that a horn is made to be heard at some distance, from behind a hill, across meadows and fields, and especially in the early morning. If you hear it from close at hand, the sound is a little too loud and penetrating.

I have told this story of what happened a few days later. But now we were saying goodbye to the Kobelikha hornblowers, not one of whom could still play.

However, our visit there was not wasted. We had listened to a kolkhoz meeting, we made the acquaintance of some good people and learned a great deal, and thirdly we each bore away with us as a keepsake an excellent palm horn, which in twenty years’ time it will be as difficult to find in the world as a live mammoth.

The Twenty-fifth Day

Every tree has its own value.

If there is a breeze, you will know from a mile away that the limes are in flower. An invisible river of honeyed scent flows from them over the bright fields. In calm weather innumerable bees fly here to their labours. An old tree, bright with blossom, hums and buzzes with the bees which flit untiringly among the flowers and leaves. They collect more honey from a single tree than from a hectare of blossoming buckwheat.

There is not the same profit from the birdcherry tree, but it flowers early in the season of the spring awakening and stirring of all earthly forces and saps. Accordingly all the poetry of secret meetings, first assignations and passionate young love is attached to it.

But the birdcherry and the lilac fade, the wild flowers wither, the leaves turn yellow. Even the bees are transferred to warmed, fragrant quarters. The colours of decay are dominant now in the autumn, and not one of the trees, which so gaily adorned our earth on summer days, has any beauty now to parade. Who in September takes any notice of the birdcherry or the jasmine? Who does not walk indifferently past hedges of sweetbriar?

But there is another tree, which we may not notice in the spring, nor does it attract our attention in July. Together with other unremarkable trees it makes up that necessary green background, against which the blossoming trees celebrated their time of flowering in a riot of colour.

The closer to autumn, the more noticeable and bright this tree becomes, and when the earth is quite poor and has nothing with which to gladden the eye of man, then the bright fires of rowan berries flare up in the valley, and poets compose their best lyric songs about this tree. Amber, orange and brilliant red clusters look out through the green filigree, and as we look at them we are disloyal to the beauty of wild-rose and jasmine.

Scarcely do the berries turn yellow, when children pick them as playthings. In August all little girls in the country adorn

themselves with amber beads made from juicy rowan berries. But it sometimes happens that, just as a small girl is reaching up to break off a big cluster, another slightly older girl will stop her and say: 'You mustn't pick those berries, don't you see it's a Nevezhinskaya rowan?'

In my childhood we had fierce arguments; one spoke of the 'Nevezhinskaya rowan', and another of the 'Nezhinskaya'. We would go and ask our elders, and they would say 'Nevezhinskaya'; we would go to the shop and look at the bottles of fruit wines, and there we should see the label 'Nezhinskaya'. So how could we decide which was right?

As we argued in this fashion we were unaware of two things: firstly, that scholars too were arguing about this very same question, and secondly, that the village of Nevezhino, after which this berry was named, was only twenty kilometres away.

Certain scholars wrote that 'in the neighbourhood of the town of Nezhin there has long been cultivated the sweet Nezhinskaya rowan-tree, from the berries of which quite a good wine is made.'

Other scholars wrote that 'within the area of the Vladimir and Ivanovo districts there is widespread the so-called Nevezhinskaya sweet-berried rowan, which derives its name from the village of Nevezhino, which is regarded as the home of this rowan.'

Who was responsible for thus confusing the matter, and how could it be resolved?

A learned commission, headed by an agricultural specialist, E. M. Petrov, visited the town of Nezhin. This is what Petrov himself wrote:

'In order to settle this matter, in 1938 we made a special visit to the town of Nezhin. Together with representatives of the agricultural department and fruit-growing specialists we established on the spot that no sweet-berried rowan has ever been grown in the area of Nezhin, nor in the Chernigov region as a whole. Later, we learned from kolkhozniks of the village of Nevezhino and people who had supplied rowan berries to Smirnov, a well-known Moscow wine-dealer, that the latter, wishing to conceal from his competitors the true source of supply of these berries, changed the name of the Nevezhinskaya berries to Nezhinskaya, and thus sent them off for supplies of the berry to the town of Nezhin . . .'

In the morning, as on all these last days, there was rain. But we had already learned that by ten o'clock it had a way of becoming intermittent, and we waited for this to happen. And in fact the wind increased, the low clouds scurried more quickly and were blown to the horizon, and though the sky was still grey, there was no more rain falling.

We set out from the village of Nebyloye to the village of Nevezhino along a path slippery with mud. This path went across a valley, then up into a dense oak forest, in which there was a dripping and rustling after the rain. A heavy drop, detaching itself from the top of an oak, pattered from leaf to leaf, until it fell at last noiselessly into the thick forest grass. For the first time on our journey we came upon mushrooms; and here we met our first mushroom gatherer—a wrinkled old man in a padded cap, with a basket.

From a distance the village of Nevezhino was like the wings of a bird. The sides were higher than the middle because a ravine ran through the centre, cutting the village in half. There could be no doubt that we had come to Nevezhino. Each garden was a rectangle planted all round the edges with rowans. In the middle there were apple trees, currant bushes, cherries, plums, sloes, and, much less frequently, potatoes; but since the other trees were lower than the rowans, the general impression was that the village stood in a wood of rowan trees. Some of them were really gigantic. The trunk, which was too big to encircle with one's arms, lifted its spreading branches high into the air, where they were blown by the damp, warm wind, like a girl's loose hair. Frequently several thick trunks rose up from a single root, gradually growing away from each other and forming a magnificent green tent. Among these giants there were young graceful rowans with thin, straight trunks and with lighter foliage. Then looking closely, we could see quite young rowan children, with small, scanty leaves. Round these the ground had been dug, hoed and probably manured; it is well known that the young receive special treatment.

We asked a girl if she could tell us about the Nevezhino rowan.

'Go to the kolkhoz gardener, he could tell you better than anyone. Go to the end of the village, there you will see a small house. His name is Alexander Ivanovich Ustinov.'

An old man was sitting on the steps of his house, cleaning mushrooms. He was a short man, with a reddish stubble on his face, blue watery eyes, a small mouth and no front teeth, so that his mouth had quite fallen in and he seemed to have no lips. He left his mushrooms, wiped his hands on his jacket and led us into the house.

'I am glad to be of service. What do you want to know?'

'We are interested in the mere fact of being in the village of Nevezhino. For there are those who dispute that there is such a village. Is it correct to speak of the Nevezhinskaya rowan?'

'Why, our peasants have been growing rowan all down the years. They plant a hundred trees to a garden. No one remembers when some were planted.'

'You have heard of Fedor Pervopechatnik, who printed the first book in Rus?'

'I don't read many books, I spend more time with the trees in the orchard. What of this Fedor, did he also grow rowans?'

'He had an assistant called Andron Nevezha. The Tsar gave them a village each for their services, and your village fell to the lot of Nevezha. He gave up printing books, came down here and began to cultivate rowans.'

'Is that the truth or just fancy?'

'We have not searched the archives, but it is a legend. Do you think it is not true?'

'It may be true that the village is called after Nevezha, but as regards the rowan it is not true. There was once a shepherd in the village, called Shchelkunov. He was not quite all there, as it is said, he was a bit weak-minded. He found this tree, the rowan, in the forest. He transplanted it to his garden, his neighbour took one from him, and so it spread.'

'Did you yourself know Shchelkunov?'

'How could I? That was two hundred years ago, perhaps three hundred. People tell the story. It is a tradition.'

'So that too is legend. Well, legends are sometimes true.'

'Not long ago I remember that two trees died; each was a hundred years old. Enormous trees! As if they had been planted by Demid himself!'

'Who was Demid?'

'Demid, the son of Alexander Mitrofanov. He was the first specialist in all the province on growing rowans. Our rowans

are known far and wide. People come here and look at our berries. They find all sort of things in them—sugar, the acidity of apples, vitamin C and vitamin A; as regards vitamins they are said to be equal to lemons and oranges.’

‘What do you do with them?’

‘In the old days many people bought them. Smirnov, the wine-dealer, he bought whole orchards. He stationed his own watchmen in the orchards. The confusion in the names arose because of him. He wanted to conceal our village from marauders from outside, so he called our rowans *Nezhinskaya*! Then about three years ago a Vladimir factory bought up one hundred and sixty tons. We take them to market too.’

‘Do people buy them?’

‘The intelligentsia do mostly—for jam.’

‘What else can you make from them?’

‘We ourselves used to dry them mostly and use them for wine. When they are dried, they are something like raisins. Will you try some?’

His wife placed before us a dish full of a dark dried berry. We began to chew, expecting them to be acid and bitter, but we found them sweet and fragrant.

‘Is it profitable to grow them?’

‘Certainly it is profitable! We live in the north, we have not many different fruits. And who says that these are not a fruit! Of course they are cheaper than apples in the market, but then they come each year, and they stand frost very well. I sent some to Kamchatka, and they were immensely grateful. Evidently they acclimatised there well; and if they flourish in Kamchatka, what harm can they come to here?’

The orchard was full of bees; Alexander Ivanovich kept an apiary. The bees were diving down from behind a tall fence to their hives, barring the path. It is better not to linger on a bees’ highway!

‘What have I to show you? Our berries have a special flavour, but in appearance they are just like the woodland rowan. Come again, when they are ripe. Perhaps you will decide to grow them, I will give you some good cuttings, your grandchildren will be grateful. Of course, ignorant people do not consider the rowan a fruit. No, my dears, it is both beautiful and useful. Every tree has its own value.’

On our way back we sat down on a rise and for a long time enjoyed the view of the village sunk in the greenery of the rowans. How beautiful it must be here in autumn when the berries blaze with their red fire!

We had another thought too. There was once a village, Negodyaikha, and the inhabitants changed its name to Lvovo. People living in Kobelikha nowadays more often call the village by the name of the kolkhoz 'Krasnoye Zarechye'. That is understandable. But the people of Nevezhino have no intention of doing anything of the kind. On the contrary, they are displeased that their kolkhoz, which used to be called after the Nevezhinskaya rowan, has been renamed 'Pobeda'. Yes, indeed, what was gained by changing the name?

The Twenty-sixth Day

On this day there was no hope that the rain would stop. Accordingly the postal van with a tarpaulin cover arrived very opportunely. We crawled in under the tarpaulin and immediately discovered that it was punctured with small holes in many places. At first we attached little significance to this; but all the time more rain kept collecting on the roof, which sagged more and more, and when the van started, it was bulging like a wineskin. The water ran in various directions and this assisted its equal distribution among all the holes in the tarpaulin. We ourselves, no less than the water, were thrown from side to side, or from back to front.

Besides the three of us undergoing a shaking in the back of the van there were two girls, a youth and an older man with two baskets, who was going to market to sell his mushrooms and berries. In contrast to the rest of us, propertyless and wanderers, he represented the private trading sector of the economy. He sat apart in a corner, clutching both his baskets.

The rear flap of the tarpaulin was hitched up under an iron bar, and we could enjoy the view like a picture inserted in a dark frame. The upper half of the picture showed a sky composed of fragments of dirty wool; the lower half revealed nothing but the greasy blackness of sodden earth. Rows of long, dimly gleaming puddles introduced some variety into the picture. The puddles were agitated as the water, expelled by the wheels of our van, flowed back into them in thick, muddy streams.

Sometimes our van went into a skid with all four wheels and began to slide slowly but surely to one side, the wheels rotating with as much effect as if the vehicle had been lifted up by a crane. The top surface of the road was sodden and liquefied, and now served as grease between the wheels and the more solid ground. Each hill had to be attacked with a rush. We had a stop of some thirty minutes at one hill, while we reversed away from it, dashed at it from a distance, dug away the mud

with a spade and threw stones into the mud. However, it was not we, the passengers, who did this, but the driver and the girl in charge of the mail.

The rain poured down without a break.

The second hill took up only twenty minutes, and we did not give up the hope that this would continue on a diminishing scale. But something unforeseen occurred.

After an ineffectual attempt to overcome the next hill, the vehicle slid round sideways and halted right across the road. The driver and the girl dug at the mud under the wheels and managed to get the van with the radiator pointing in the right direction. But a second attempt led to the same result, that is, a slipping down the hill with a simultaneous turn of ninety degrees.

The first of the passengers to take action (I will give him his due!) was Serega. He took off his shoes, rolled up his trousers, and boldly jumped down into the mixture of rain and mud. The lad followed him. There began a squelching from below the van; grunts, groans and muttered curses too emanated from that quarter.

The collective spirit, which had been instilled in us from childhood, got the upper hand over our reluctance to get wet and muddy. By degrees the rest of us joined those toiling below. Only the representative of private enterprise remained seated with his baskets within.

Our task was on the one hand to remove the ridge standing in our way with the spade, and on the other hand to pave that section of the road with stones. There were quantities of stones in heaps beside the road. We took shifts in digging, as there was only one spade. The work of paving was carried on by everyone all the time.

We tried to choose out the flattest stones, placed them beneath a wheel, put others alongside, and then carried out a test. The driver washed his hands in a puddle and climbed into his seat. All of us pushed against the van, wherever we could, if possible from the side, since while we pushed two streams of mud and stones were forced up from beneath the wheels. Each time the trial ended in the same way—the wheels slipped off the stony rails which we had laid down, scattering the stones in all directions, and settled even deeper into the slime.

‘We must make the paving wider. Let’s try three rows of stones.’

One and a half to two hours passed in this way almost without our noticing it. Finally the representative of the private trading sector himself could not hold out, or perhaps he was cold and bored sitting alone inside the van; in any case, turning up his coat collar against the rain, he descended to the ground and began to give various bits of advice, such as: ‘It might not be a bad idea for someone to run to the woods over there and cut down some brushwood.’

I cannot be sure whether it was intentional or not, but a whole spadeful of mud (the driver at this moment was digging) landed on the adviser’s raincoat-clad shoulder, plastering his ear and part of his cheek. He was prepared to be cross about it, but the driver turned his back and continued his methodical work with the spade.

During intervals for a smoke we engaged in angry talk about our roads in general. The driver said that on a hundred kilometres of such a road he used several hundred kilogrammes of petrol; consequently over the whole country an immense quantity is used wastefully. A vehicle’s life is shortened by at least five times, not to mention the tyres. If all this were reckoned up in roubles, it would probably be no loss to build some good roads.

Then think of the time wasted by tens of thousands of people, and the drivers’ nerves! This cannot be included in the financial estimate, of course, but it should be included in some reckoning!

When you drive along a dry, dusty road, at almost every yard, at every slope you will see sticks, brushwood, straw and stones—all evidence of the same sort of struggle as we had undergone. I forgot to mention earlier how the chairman of one kolkhoz complained to us: ‘I have cars, but I only use them two or three months in the year. The rest of the time they are idle, either at home, or somewhere by the side of the road if they have been caught by the rain.’

‘Well, that’s that,’ the driver said at last, putting on his jacket. ‘Thank you for your help. We have done all we could. Unconditional surrender. I shall sit and wait until somebody drags me out, or I will ask the kolkhoz for a tractor. You must do as you like, either sit here with me or go on on foot. But I

may be sitting here till morning. There will be a twenty-four hours delay with the post.'

We said a warm goodbye to the driver and set off, while the trader climbed back into the van with his baskets.

In the afternoon the rain slackened and we felt more cheerful. But what a pity that we were tired and soaked, and so looked down at our feet more than round about us, because when for a moment we lifted our eyes, the horizon suddenly receded and the green expanse of the fields lay open to us. But the next minute the world narrowed again to a small section of muddy road and our own feet trying to get to the end of this small section; but we were not able to do this, for it moved along with us. From the big world around us there have remained in my memory a wonderful cloud, a picturesque group of trees, a belfry rising up above a field of rye; from the small world round my feet—a trodden blade of grass, a trickle of rainwater as wide as my palm, a straw stuck to the mud on the sole of my shoe.

But once we lifted up our eyes and stopped entranced. The road curved slightly and plunged between thick, tall rye. Far away above the rye there rose up a white gleaming tower with a blue onion dome upon it, close by another tower with a golden dome, then a cluster of five towers and domes together, to the left—a high, slender belfry, and still more to the left the pink walls of a monastery like the walls of a fortress with turrets along it, and still more belfries and churches rose up above the rye. They were spread out in a long chain, the eye could not encompass them all together, but it was necessary to turn one's head right and left. In that quarter the sky had become quite blue, so that there were three main colours, apart from the half-tones: the greeny-gold of the field of rye, the dark blue of the sky in the background, and the glittering white of the Suzdal churches.

An old man in an old-fashioned long coat was standing by the side of the road, leaning on a staff. This staff had a sharp iron tip, which in case of need could serve as a deadly weapon. A canvas bag hung from his shoulder, and a mighty, white beard was blown by the wind. The staff was long and the old man leaned upon it, his legs wide apart, and gazed into the distance. Since the field of rye and the whole magical chain of the Suzdal

towers were behind him, I could not resist the temptation of taking his photograph.

I photographed him from every side with the agility of a true reporter, trying to make the beard blowing in the wind the main interest in the picture. And the old man went on standing there, not blinking an eye nor changing his pose.

We came to gardens, bed after bed of onions. There were many tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots and cabbages as well. All the low ground before the town was given over to vegetable gardens. Then you take a few steps up a slope and find yourself in the main street of Suzdal.

Strange to say, the hotel had vacant rooms, and very good ones too, and the tea-room was like a good town restaurant.

We would have liked to know whether our van driver had yet managed to scramble out of that slough, or whether he and the girl with the post were still stranded there, damp and shivering, preparing to take a nap in the driver's cabin.

The Twenty-seventh—the Thirtieth Day

So we stayed in Suzdal. It is customarily thought that a town must have suburbs, that it must have a railway station. It is usually considered that a town cannot manage without some kind of a factory or an industrial enterprise of some sort. There is none of all this in Suzdal.

Suzdal has no factory chimneys, no railway, no big city buildings, it is lost among the cornfields of the Vladimir plain. The towers and cupolas of churches look out from the rye. Fields of grain surround the town and come right up to the outermost houses, just as they do to the outskirts of a village. The meadows, which cling beside the river Kamenka, penetrate right to the very centre of the town.

Away from the main street you come upon little side roads, completely overgrown with grass. Where the pavements should be, there winds a narrow little path, but on every side it is all green. You look along such a little road, and it is empty—no pedestrians, no motor-cars! Perhaps a couple of children run out, playing and rolling in the grass in the very middle of the road, where there should be the main lane for traffic. This little road reaches its not very distant end up against a monastery wall usually, or a church; thus it leaves the impression of a quiet, peaceful cul-de-sac. The windows of the houses have carved, wooden frames, and on the sills everywhere there are flowers.

Almost every house has its own garden and orchard, and before the windows there is a little piece of ground fenced off, like a basket, full of lilac.

The central streets are partly paved, partly are now in the process of being paved. The town has been declared a historical monument and is being got ready for the reception of countless tourists from home and abroad.

In 1813 after the Russian victory over Napoleon the people of Suzdal, in honour of this victory, erected a huge belfry, which towered above the town. Shortly afterwards it was struck

by lightning, so now it stands without a top, a dull building, the highest in Suzdal, standing out stupidly from the surrounding white, tastefully built churches and belfries. It is said that there are fifty-eight churches in Suzdal, and since it is a little town, they stand close to one another.

Suzdal is being restored. It has been decided to restore the original appearance of the various buildings and monasteries. The man in charge of this work is Aleksei Dmitrievich Varganov.

While we were still in Moscow we had heard about this man who is devoting all his strength and knowledge to the town of Suzdal. Moscow historians, artists and antiquarians know Varganov to be a discriminating expert. A Moscow scholar will not tell you to go to Suzdal, but to go to see Varganov.

The former archbishop's palace is to be found behind a high stone wall. You go through a vaulted arch and come into what seems like a transparent beehive; it is sunny and stifling with heat and the smell of honey, there are innumerable bees. The cause of this are the white fragrant flowers which fill the yard, especially round the Monomakh Cathedral.

'Do you want Varganov himself? He has taken a group out to the city ramparts. You'll catch them up.'

The group had stopped on the ramparts. Young men and women were sitting on the grass at the very edge of the wall. The ground sloped steeply within the sharp curve of the river Kamenka. The wall, which continued as a natural hill, bent round to the right, forming a horseshoe, so that the whole of Suzdal could be seen in silhouette.

Among this group of young men and girls stood a man, not very tall, in a worn jacket, with a mane of dark curly hair. Small, with a lean, clean-shaven face, he looked younger than his fifty years, in spite of the weariness in his eyes. He began to tell us about Suzdal, quietly, unlike most deaf people.

'Suzdal is more ancient than other Russian towns including Vladimir, not to mention Moscow. It is not known precisely when it was founded. It is also not known why it was called Suzdal. It is a word of pre-Slav origin, just like Nerl and Klyazma. Like them the word Suzdal has not been deciphered and its meaning is obscure.

'However, if we cannot elucidate this question, another and

more important one is absolutely clear—why was it just here that the city of Suzdal was founded and then developed into the capital of a wide principate.

‘If you have the imagination, you can climb a height with me and look down from there on the land of Central Russia. In the midst of sandy and unproductive soil, largely covered by deep forest, there is a small wedge of black earth. Its origin is mysterious. So Suzdal is the centre, as it were the capital, of this strip of arable, forest-encircled land.

‘Furthermore, if we mount up still higher, we shall see that Suzdal is not at all far from the big trade routes, but that it was at the very centre of busy traffic. At the present day it is far from them, because the routes have changed; but in the old days there was one route from Novgorod to the Black Sea, another route from Novgorod to the Caspian. Suzdal grew up on this second route.

‘Where we now see beautiful yellow water-lilies, flowed the river Kamenka, which was sufficiently deep for merchants’ boats to sail along. Four versts from here the Kamenka flows into the Nerl, the Nerl carries its waters into the Klyazma, the Klyazma—into the Oka, and the Oka into the Volga. And there in the blue haze glimmers the fabulous East—perfumes, carpets, spices and other luxuries.

‘Where the Volga-Don Canal is today, there used to be a portage to the Don, and in the blue haze glimmer other far lands—Byzantium, Venice, Arabia; that is why in excavations we find Persian, Indian and Arabian money in Suzdal’s black earth.

‘Christianity, which came from Kiev, did not take root in Suzdal immediately or peacefully. The rebellion of the heathen is well known. It is in connection with this rebellion that we find the first mention of Suzdal in the ancient chronicles. This was in 1024.

‘The Cathedral of the Birth of the Mother of God was built by southern craftsmen, from Kiev. They did not reckon with the frost and dryness of a northern climate, the foundations were not strong enough and the cathedral fell. However, it was rebuilt. We shall shortly go into it. Recently I dug down to the pavement of Vladimir Monomakh. It lies now at a depth of two metres ninety-six centimetres.

‘Yury Vladimirovich Dolgoruky chose Suzdal as his capital,

but settled in Kideksha, four versts from here, where the Kamenka flows into the Nerl. Andrew Bogolyubsky too, who counted Vladimir as his capital, settled in Bogolyubovo, where the Nerl joins the Klyazma. It was safer so.

'When Suzdal was a flourishing, powerful city, smoke was rising from the chimneys of a mere handful of houses in the hamlet of Moscow, deep in the forest away to the west.

'One of the sons of Prince Alexander Nevsky, the youngest, Daniel, on the death of his father received as his portion the remote and neglected village of Moscow, an unimportant appanage of Vladimir and Suzdal. Daniel went there, and from that time the power of Moscow began to increase, and continued with the children and grandchildren of Daniel, until the whole position was reversed; Moscow became the capital, and Vladimir and Suzdal its dependencies.

'Your princes,' here Varganov was addressing the tourists from Moscow, 'brought war against us. For instance, Dimitry Donskoy conquered Suzdal. He entered the palace and there sat the Prince's daughter, Avdotyushka. It so came about that Dimitry conquered Suzdal, but Avdotyyushka conquered Dimitry. They were married in Vladimir. So there are ties of kinship between us. Accordingly Suzdal was united to Moscow fairly easily. Now let us go to the cathedral built by Vladimir Monomakh.'

Again the blazing honeyed heat of the archbishop's courtyard encircled us, and the transition to the stony coolness of the cathedral was striking.

Varganov nodded towards the bottom corner of the gates. 'Twenty years ago I thought I would clean them. I cleaned a small corner, and there was Samson rending the lion's jaw. Absolutely Byzantine! The walls are covered with religious paintings. The top ones are not interesting. But if you clean them, you find underneath frescoes of the seventeenth century, take away the frescoes and you open up decoration of the times of Monomakh.

'Frescoes are applied to damp plaster. The painting must be done within hours before the plaster dries. Some craftsmen used to outline their drawing with a nail.' Varganov showed us some circles marked in the plaster, among which were some which had been scratched to no purpose.

‘Was he inexperienced?’ we inquired.

‘More likely he was tipsy, so he spoiled the plaster. Rublev painted his frescoes directly, without nails. But he was a virtuoso.’

We came to the Pokrovsky Monastery. Varganov led us first to the crypt. As we went down the brick steps, Varganov said:

‘Ivan the Terrible liked to come here. This monastery stood high in his favour. Before marching against Kazan, he attended a service here. He did the same on his return from Kazan. He made a vow that if he captured the city, he would give princely gifts to the monastery.’

We were now surrounded by stone tombs.

‘Katherine Shuiskaya, daughter of Malyuts Skuratov,’ Varganov said casually, pointing to one tomb. ‘When Skopin, after defeating the Poles, entered Moscow, the Shuiskys out of envy decided to poison him. This lady gave him poison at a feast.’

‘Tsaritsa Alexandra,’ said Aleksei Dmitrievich, stopping by the next tomb. ‘Ivan the Terrible killed his own son, and the wife was made a widow. That is her tomb. And there is the Tsaritsa Anna, the fifth wife of Ivan himself. She, poor woman, was given poison. The daughter of Boris Godunov, Xenia, lay here. She had an unhappy life. Fate smiled on her at first, then all was ruined. She was betrothed to a Danish prince, but the Pretender Dimitry seized her and forced her to be his mistress. Then Marina Mniszek intervened and gave orders for her exile.’

As Varganov talked, the tombstones, glimpsed in the obscurity of the monastery crypt, gloomy enough in themselves, took on an even more gloomy air. One was given poison to drink, another administered poison, a third had her husband murdered, a fourth was exiled.

‘This is perhaps the most interesting tomb,’ Varganov said, stopping by the one nearest the entrance. ‘The father of Ivan the Terrible, Tsar Basil, founded the cathedral of this monastery. He had a wife, the beautiful young Solomoniya Saburova. She, of course, could have had no premonition that in ten years her husband would banish her to this monastery. But he did so, because she did not bear him a child. The Tsar needed an heir, and Solomoniya did not give him one. The poor woman

did not want to become a nun; she struggled and wept, so it is said. Meanwhile Tsar Basil married Elena Glinskaya, who soon bore a son, no other than the future Ivan the Terrible. But what of Solomoniya? She was made a nun because she was barren, but she soon became pregnant and gave birth to a boy. This child was doomed from his birth. He would of course be killed so that, when he grew up, he should not lay claim to the throne and bring trouble into the kingdom. He was after all the brother of Ivan the Terrible!

‘There was a rumour that he had died and been buried in this vault. Not long ago I had the thought that I would excavate and see what was in the tomb. I found a coffin, and in the coffin . . . a doll, just an ordinary doll, clothed, as though it had been laid there quite recently. I sent it to Moscow for experts to look at, and I received back a baby’s silk shirt; the rest of the clothes were not worth notice. It means then that the burial was a fake, carried out so as to save the life of the living child.’

‘And what became of him?’

Varganov paused for a moment, perhaps for greater effect.

‘Have you heard of the brigand Kudeyar? I have no exact proofs, but circumstantial historical evidence, experience and intuition prompt me to say that he became the brigand Kudeyar.’

‘What, Kudeyar, the hero of so many songs and legends?’

Indeed it may be true: one brother had the Russian throne, the other—freedom to roam over the whole Russian land. A doll is laid in the ground, and the real son in the company of his trusted friends roams on horseback through the forests, under the name of Kudeyar. He does not envy the lot of the Tsar, who sees sedition and treachery in every corner. And when he has to die, it will be in the open air, not in a stifling bedchamber, under the stars, not beneath a dim lamp.

‘So what do we see here?’ we tried to sum up. ‘Basil exiled his wife to the Pokrovsky Monastery, his son also sent his wife here, and the widow of his grandson was also here. So too was the daughter of Boris Godunov.’

‘That is not all. The first wife of Peter the First, Avdotya Lopukhina, the mother of the Prince Alexis, also lived here. She was not a nun, but lived a secular life in the monastery.

Major Stepan Glebov was sent to Suzdal at that time to enrol recruits. He pleased Avdotya especially, for which reason he was impaled. Avdotya herself was imprisoned in the Schlussemburg fortress, under suspicion of conspiring against Peter on behalf of Alexis. Such is the monastery. We are now carrying out some restorations.'

Varganov showed us some examples of this work, which was then being carried out in the refectory of the monastery. In the restoration of Suzdal Varganov's task was to discover the early work under the superimposed brickwork of a later age.

'Sometimes from one little wedge of brick, we have to restore a whole window.'

'Is that possible?'

'At first, I too thought it was impossible. But it can be done just as a zoologist restores the whole skeleton of a flying lizard from one or two bones found in the earth. It is interesting how we looked for the staircase in the archbishop's palace.'

'How was that?'

'We began to count the layers of wash on the walls. We found eleven, but in some places only two. Evidently then, where there were two, there must have been something which prevented them from putting a wash on the wall. When we marked out the edge between the eleven washes and the two, we got the outline of a staircase. So little by little we are restoring it all.'

We asked to be shown what else there was of interest.

Varganov threw back his head and pointed to three windows side by side in the brick wall of the monastery. 'Isn't that interesting?'

'Windows . . . Yes, of course, remarkable.'

'You people have no eyes. Don't you see that each window has different carving round it?'

We too then saw that the stone carving round each window was different and that this to some extent destroyed the architectural unity of the whole.

'You see it then! And how did it come about?'

'Lack of skill in the architect, probably.'

Varganov smiled.

'The architect is not to blame, but the Russian character. Each window was carved by one craftsman. The craftsmen

all vied with each other, each wanted to do better than his neighbour, so they all went their own way.'

'You read the stones like a book.'

'Yes,' Varganov agreed without any false modesty, 'these are real volumes in stone. Suzdal as a whole is folklore, expressed architecturally. The whole of Suzdal is one song in stone. Incidentally this conviction helped me to save Suzdal from destruction. It was proposed to pull down the churches and leave only some of the most ancient structures. What was to be done! If a church was built in the eighteenth century, perhaps it may not in itself be worth much, but pull it down and the whole ensemble of the town will be destroyed, there will be a gap in it. I managed to persuade them that Suzdal must be regarded as a whole, not as a collection of churches. It is a single song in stone, and you cannot remove some of the words from a song.'

'Aleksei Dmitrievich, Pozharsky is buried somewhere in Suzdal. Can we visit his grave? After all, he was a hero, a patriot, the saviour of Rus!'

Varganov took us within the high, pink walls of the Spas-Efimovsky Monastery.

Pozharsky's grave was very well tended; the grass round it was cut and watered.

The story of Pozharsky's grave is as follows. At first it was not known where he was buried. Count Uvarov dug and discovered a vault with tombs in three rows. This was the family vault of the Pozharskys and Khovanskys. In the third row there was a tomb which had the marks of special attention. The matter was brought before the Tsar, and a commission was sent down. In 1852 after long hesitations the coffin was opened, and they found the skeleton of a very old man in a silk shroud, and the remnants of a boyar's ornamentation (gold embroidery on the tunic and girdle), such as no one of the Pozharsky family could have except Dmitry.

There is a little square before the entrance to the monastery, where a bust of Dmitry Pozharsky has been set up.

'And now I will show you the most terrible and gloomy thing of all,' Varganov said, and led us into the farthest end of the monastery yard. 'Have you heard of the Suzdal political prison? It was founded by Catherine II.'

It seemed that we had reached the end of the monastery yard and were faced by a wall; we had the impression that there was open country beyond, for the monastery was on the edge of the town. But we passed through some narrow gates and found ourselves in an annexe to the monastery within a strange, stone enclosure. Out of this opened yet another enclosure with the most innocent looking entrance, as though you were about to go into an apartment with a primus stove, children, and clothes hanging on a line. But in fact you go into a narrow corridor; on the right and left are doors. These were cells. Each cell was a square or oblong room with a wooden floor and a small window, from which part of the yard outside was visible. But where was this yard? It is said that the prisoners could not discover during the whole of their lives in which town they were incarcerated.

A little distance from the end of the corridor we noticed the remains of a ruined wall and we asked the reason.

‘Yes, there was a wall there, and several cells beyond. These were special cells for very special prisoners. It was called the secret section. Even the warders of the first part of the corridor did not know who was imprisoned in the farther cells. The prisoners were known only by numbers. The Decembrist, Shakhovsky, was in prison here for several years and finally went out of his mind. One of these cells was got ready for Lev Tolstoy, but the Tsar realised in time that Lev Tolstoy could not be confined within a prison cell.’

We were relieved to leave this gloomy place, which looked such an ordinary annexe to the Spas-Efimovsky Monastery, but where people vanished for the whole of their lives without trace.

Next morning we went to say goodbye to Varganov. He was sorry that we were leaving so soon, before looking round the very interesting museum library and seeing the treasures of the museum—ancient embroidery and some very rare icons. We too were sorry to say goodbye to this man. We learned something new from him every minute. Even in the last minutes his conversation was not confined to farewells. He was talking about Scythian culture.

‘It is thought that they were barbarians and nothing more. I advise you to visit the treasure store of the Leningrad Hermitage,

where there is Scythian gold which would make even the craftsmen of Byzantium exclaim in astonishment.'

Varganov was a peasant's son and came from near Rostov Veliky. He attended the History of Art Institute and also the Academy of the Arts of Fresco and Mosaic. After that he came immediately to Suzdal. That was in 1930. He found there a miserable little museum, where only some church vestments were stored. There followed twenty-six years of continuous, painstaking work on the restoration of the ancient monuments and the establishment of a very rich museum. During these twenty-six years Varganov has taken a holiday only three times. He could never spare the time.

The people of Suzdal were the first to value his work. All of them, young and old, know him and greet him as he goes along the street.

The Thirty-first Day

In the Suzdal market there were quantities of berries from the forest —wild strawberries, bilberries and raspberries —and again we felt the urge to leave the town and go into the forest and the cool, winding forest paths.

By the evening of this day we were deep within the famous Dyukov forest.

Quite a long time had passed since we began our travels near the wooden bridge over the river Kirzhach. The cranberries were then in flower with their tiny, fragrant bells, and now the berries were turning red. The bilberries too were flowering, and now the berries had ripened. As you walk through a forest you involuntarily take hold of the branches which stretch out towards the path. At the beginning of our walk we would grasp the tassels of fir branches, which were soft like fresh grass; if you crushed them between your fingers, they gave out a strong smell of pine. But now if you took hold of a fir branch, you pricked your hand. The soft, spring needles had grown hard.

A well-trodden path led us to a picturesque marsh. The bright green of the reeds was interspersed with white clouds of wild angelica, which spread abroad its unique, river scent. Thickets of bushy willows, taking a firm hold along the edge of the marsh, kept back the thrust of the forest firs. There was a bridge over the marsh, made of three planks laid side by side, and a handrail on one side. The length must have been not less than one hundred and fifty metres. When you reached the middle, you saw on either hand picturesque views of marsh surrounded by forest. Here and there black mirrors of water were thrown among the bright green, on which floated white and yellow water-lilies.

At the end of the bridge the track led up a hill bare of trees to the outskirts of a village. This village made a bad impression on us; the houses were old and dark, many of them were ramshackle, in some the rafters could be seen through the roof.

Several women were sitting on a bench, and we asked them

why the village looked so neglected; the forest was close at hand, but there was no sign of new timber.

'Our village, Gusevo, is very short of men,' one middle-aged woman answered. 'All we women here are widows. How can we cut down trees for timber! When our children grow up, then we shall begin to repair the houses. All our hopes are with the children.'

During our journey we noticed that in general the forest villages were much poorer than those in open country. Of course the ground is not so fertile. Only that morning we had been admiring the tall grain around Suzdal, and now towards evening we saw these fields with sparse, short wheat. The ground is grey like ash, and under a thin layer there is only sand.

The sun was sinking and the sky grew red with the sunset. The houses and barns of the village of Polushino stood out in silhouette against it. As we entered the brigade leader's house, I glanced through a half-open door and saw a man asleep in his clothes and boots. However, the woman of the house said that the brigade leader was not at home.

'Very well, we will wait for him, however late he may be.'

The brigade leader's wife was uneasy and fidgety.

'He's sleeping.'

'Drunk?'

'Drunk as could be!'

'How is that, when it's the haymaking, a busy time?'

'There was a wedding at our neighbour's two days ago, and since then he has been dead drunk.'

'Well, let him sleep, but can you help us to find lodging for the night?'

A woman carrying a tin pail was coming along the street. She came from the forest, where she had been gathering bilberries. The brigade leader's wife stopped her, and we heard the woman refusing to have us. We intervened, offering money in advance, and in half an hour Aunt Shura was treating us to tea and bilberries.

From the village came the sound of an accordion and the voices of girls singing a merry song. The boys joined in with the chorus, making a general hubbub. Aunt Shura listened in obvious alarm.

‘My lad is there too. I am only at ease in my mind, when he is here before my eyes.’

‘You love him so much?’

‘I am afraid of the drink. How I hate the drink! I have lost two sons because of it. One was a driver, and he is now in prison; he killed a man. They drink so that they don’t see anything in front of them. The other fell under a train, when he was drunk. I have two children left. The youngest is grown up now. My heart is never still on his account, it beats like an aspen leaf on a calm day.’

The accordion was still being played, and we wanted to go and look at the singing and dancing; for this was the first time we had come upon such merrymaking during our travels.

While we were drinking tea, a white mist had drifted into the village from the river. Immediately mosquitoes began their droning around us.

The accordion player was seated on a block of wood on the edge of a trodden down circle of ground in the grass. Two girls, like guardian angels, stood just behind him and waved branches to keep the mosquitoes away from his completely impassive face. Thirty or forty lads and girls were gathered round, while two girls were dancing and singing verses in turn.

It was long after we had gone to bed that we still heard the sound of the accordion and the gay girlish voices.

The cocks of Polushino were clapping their wings and exchanging cries.

The Thirty-second Day

The rain began again in the night. It washed away the white mist of the previous evening, so that all the outlines were clear and distinct and Polushino in the morning was bathed in translucent, light air after the rain.

It was almost impossible to walk. Our feet slithered on the slimy road, and it was with difficulty that we got to Ivanovskaya, the centre of the enlarged kolkhoz, of which Polushino was a part.

It seemed as though the village was asleep in spite of the lateness of the hour; it was about eight in the morning. Certainly, there was smoke curling up from some of the chimneys.

We were now in the district of wooden lace, if I may express it so. We were particularly impressed by the village of Ivanovskaya.

Here is an ordinary timber house with a boarded roof. But the owner, moved by gratitude and love for the house, which shelters him and his family from the winter frosts, from the autumn rains and from curious eyes at any time of the year, and also because this house is his and will be handed down to his children, and most important of all, because he has invested much labour and money in it, has adorned his house as a bridegroom adorns his bride.

Let us begin with the entrance. You approach up steps between two wooden posts. But these are no ordinary posts, but are carved, so that the wood seems to have been twisted like string. These spirals give them lightness, and they do not look burdened by the weight of the roof of the porch, from which a border of wooden lace hangs down. A wooden spire is set on the porch roof, which is tent-shaped. On the tip of the spire is a wooden cock, which turns in the wind, being both a weather-vane and an adornment.

A lace edging encircles the whole house below the eaves. But this is nothing compared with the window-frames; these are the chief adornment of the house. The upper edge is always reminiscent of a woman's headdress in olden days or a king's

crown. In one way or another each window is given a certain splendour and pride. The side frames hang down like a girl's plaits. Meadow flowers, leaves and song birds are cunningly woven into the wooden lace of the frames and cornice.

The dormer window is a separate work of art. The usual decorations of the house are reduced here to miniature size. The carved posts at the sides are half a metre in height. All the carving is small, precise, painstaking.

Not content with wooden ornamentation, the craftsman also works with metal. An iron strip, perforated with an ornamental design, runs round the pinnacle of the whole house. It may be quite rough when looked at close at hand, but from a distance (and who is going to climb up on the roof to examine it!) the design gives the impression of fine, delicate tracery. And when the sky behind is blue, the design too looks blue within the black frame of the metal.

The final touch is given to the house by the drain-pipes. If you wander only through Kameshkov district you can acquire a whole collection of original pipes, or at least photographs of them. They are decorated with iron caps, some with knobs at the sides, some with a knob on the top, some with iron clusters hanging downwards. The top of each drain-pipe is especially decorative, and since there are two of these, and they run down the sides of the house, their ornamentation gives a finish and completeness to the whole ensemble. There are no two identical houses in the whole village, just as there are no two identical faces. Like a person, each house has its own expression and character—happy, gloomy, indifferent or blind.

It seems that the window frames last longer than the houses themselves. We frequently saw old, blackened carvings transferred to a new façade, still showing drops and trickles of resin.

We were greatly tempted to ask for some kind of horse transport. We knocked at the door of the kolkhoz chairman's house. A middle-aged woman was busy at the stove.

'The devil knows where he's gone—he's vanished since the evening!'

'How do you mean—vanished?'

'He got on his motor bicycle and away! Perhaps to Tyntsy, he has a mother there. Perhaps to Kameshky, to his wife, or perhaps he has ridden off to Moscow.'

Having visited dozens of kolkhozes in various parts of the country, as well as all these recently in Vladimir district, some of which were big and prosperous, others mediocre or really bad, I conclude that the state of the kolkhoz depends entirely on the chairman.

Why do people go back to some of the kolkhozes from the town, whereas they go away from Polushino or Ivanovskaya to work in the nearest factory? Is it not because in the one case the chairman is closely involved in the life of the kolkhoz every second, he keeps all the details in his mind, whereby he is able to have a picture of the whole state of affairs constantly before his eyes. But here the brigade leader was drunk for three days, as we had discovered, and the chairman had disappeared on his motor-cycle.

The woman treated us to hot boiled potatoes, and we went out again into the road, which was empty as before.

A lorry drove, lurching and creaking, into the village, piled with logs higher than the driver's cabin. Planks were stuck in vertically round the edges to keep the logs from scattering. One of us automatically raised a hand, and the lorry halted.

'Get in, I've plenty of room.'

'Shan't we fall off from there?'

'It's quite possible, but I'm not forcing you to get in.'

We began to scramble up, and had not yet managed to settle ourselves in the gaps between the logs, when there was a great lurch and we all frenziedly clutched whatever we could. Then there was a lurch to the other side, then we were flung upwards so that we never managed to settle down properly. The logs beneath us rolled in various different directions, like the parts of a weaving loom. Our knees and hands began to be covered with bruises, the muscles of our arms and backs ached with the strain. Sometimes one of us even contrived to hit his chin against a log. But nothing remained for us except to bear it and hold on.

Then, high on our perch, we suddenly remembered that in our haste we had not asked where the logs and we ourselves were going.

Our apprehensions of falling off from the logs or together with them were reinforced by another unpleasantness; the lorry drove into a forest, and we were lashed by the branches, some of which were quite big.

But everything comes to an end. The lorry stopped, and under our feet we felt solid ground. We stood again upon the earth, but far from the place where we had been separated from it. The village with the wooden lace had been carried for ever into the past and seemed like a dream.

Feeling our feet on firm ground, we looked about us. Half an hour's shaking up had removed us to a completely different world. On a post there was a big electric clock, such as is suspended over a crossroads in Moscow. Under the clock there was a book stall, a haberdashery stall and a bread stall, close by there was a café. All this, if you include a small factory, was called Volodarka; we saw this name for the first time, for it was not marked on our map. It was pure chance which had brought us here. We had to think how to get away again.

The Party organiser of the factory, a man with a heavily pock-marked face, listened to our request that we should be shown something of the production of gauze, and then be taken on in the factory car. To tell the truth, we had no great desire to see round the factory, but it is impossible to ask for a car without any excuse at all. Usually there is a willing response to the first half of the request, and complete reluctance regarding the second. But here it was the other way round.

'We have nothing interesting to show you, we are re-loading the looms, there is nothing being produced. I advise you not to waste your time. In any case, this is a small, trifling little factory. But you can have transport willingly, at once, only it's a lorry.'

He told us that there were several such little factories in those parts. They were all set up because of the cheap manpower before the Revolution, and worked with imported cotton. It was strange to see these small textile factories in forest regions thousands of miles from Uzbek cotton.

The lorry soon arrived. Rosa travelled in the cabin, Serega and I were jolted about in the body of the lorry. When we reached the river Uvod, we thanked the driver, and once again were left alone.

The bridge over the Uvod was being repaired. Beyond was a paved road, which evidently had little traffic, for grass was growing between the stones. Along the sides, among currant and raspberry bushes, valerian was growing riotously, so that

we walked along a white and pink alley of valerian. Although Rosa is a doctor, it was the first time that she had seen this flower growing wild, and at first scarcely believed it. We had to dig out a root, split it and give it to her to smell. The smell was as strong and distinct as if she had been sniffing it from a phial.

For the rest of the day we walked over ground which was drying only slowly, and which from time to time was sprinkled with fine rain.

In one place at the edge of a village, two faded women were poking their heads from a window and surveying the road; they wore bright silk dressing-gowns, were heavily made up, and looked like week-enders from Moscow. They called out to us, inviting us to converse. Among other things, we asked them whether the main office of the kolkhoz was in their village. They said that they did not know.

'How is it possible not to know? What kolkhoz do you belong to?'

'Not to any. We are on our own.'

At this point a man rushed out from the gates. He was red-faced, with a reddish stubble on his face and small malicious eyes; he looked very like a bulldog. He shouted oaths at us.

'What is it you want? Be off, there's nothing for you here.'

He shouted with the rage of a man of property, who trembles for every stick and every nail he possesses.

We should have liked to have bashed him on his red face, but the axe which he had warily snatched up thwarted our intentions.

Incidentally it was only here that we found out that there are still individual peasants in the villages, not members of a kolkhoz, and that they may make up as many as half of the village. Here we met one of them in his logical development, if not a kulak, then a man with the kulak mentality. He was revealed to us momentarily, but very vividly. This was on the outskirts of the village of Panyukhino. However, such people cannot really be called individual peasants, for they do not possess their own land, except for their special plot. These are hangers-on of the kolkhoz, living on crumbs from the kolkhoz table. When they need it, they ask the chairman for the use of a horse or a few logs. These are social parasites of a new kind. The

individual peasant farmer does engage in production, but this kind does not.

Sounds came to us over the fields from the next village, which we saw as soon as we left Panyukhino; they were muffled by the distance, so we could not distinguish whether it was singing or shouting. We might have thought that there was some kind of disturbance there, had it not been for the sound of an accordion which could occasionally be heard through the confused din.

Coming into the village, we saw a crowd of youths, drunk, swaying and bawling songs. Smartly dressed girls, as from a town, walked about in separate groups. Elderly men and women sat on benches near the houses. None were sober. For the second day the village of Klyachkovo was celebrating the festival of the Vladimir Mother of God with revelry and drink.

Apprehensively the three of us walked through the drunken village, arousing general curiosity.

On the porch of a neat, well-tended house there sat an old man and woman, huddling close together. We applied to them for lodging. The old man found some special home-brewed vodka, the old woman brought out some currant wine. The samovar sang softly, eggs were placed side by side in it.

It was in this house for the first time in all our journey that the owners refused to take any money for our lodging.

The Thirty-third Day

An abundance of ripe raspberries along the sides of the road slowed down our progress. We would make a solemn agreement not to pay any more attention to the red berries interspersed among the green, but one of us would forget, stretch out a hand and pop a berry in his mouth, then inevitably a second and a third. There were also blackcurrant bushes, but the fruit was still green.

A forest of ancient trees rose up behind the bushes beside the road. On the left hand between the trees we occasionally caught sight of a gleam of dark water. We looked out for a path in order to turn off along it and find out what was there—a lake, bog or neglected pond. Before long we came to such a path, leading off to the left.

We had only taken two hundred steps along it, when we were stopped by the frantic barking of a dog tied by a chain to a tree. Not far off was a hut, which looked like a forester's lodge.

The forester met us on the porch. He was slightly tipsy. Serega, with an artist's memory for faces, assured us that he had seen him in Klyachkovo doing honour to the Vladimir Mother of God. That was probably the case.

Trying not to show any signs of this, and collecting all his self-control to this end (for who knew what sort of people we were!) the forester invited us into the house, and wanted to prepare a meal. But we said that we did not want anything to eat, and that we had only turned off the road to find out what the water was, gleaming between the trees.

When he realised that no harm was coming to him, and that we were not officials, the forester, Vorontsov, relaxed and began to smile, his eyes glistening as they do when a man has not breakfasted only on bread and milk.

'As for the water, I will show you it all. I am the biggest specialist on the waters hereabout. My daughter will be back soon, and I will show you everything. Without a boat, of course, it is impossible, and my daughter has gone off in the boat for strawberries.'

The water was only fifty paces away from the threshold, but lower, since the house stood on a ridge. We soon heard the splash of oars, and a young, pregnant woman appeared on the path, carrying a basket full of strawberries.

The narrow little boat sank deep in the water under the weight of four people. Vorontsov sat in the stern and cautiously began to row a zigzag course with an oar, shaped like a spade. A lake of unusual beauty surrounded us. Dark green oaks and limes, growing thickly along the banks, were reflected clearly in the still water. A bright green strip of grass lined the shore between the water and the trees. White lilies rested here and there on the water. Each flower was outlined so sharply against the darkness of the lake, that we noticed them usually at a distance of two or three hundred metres.

'There are very many of these lakes,' Vorontsov told us. 'They are all connected together by channels, so that it is possible to reach any of them by boat.'

'You mentioned two of the lakes with the name 'beaver'. So at one time there were beavers here?'

'There still are. Not only in those two lakes, but in all of them. But certainly the names were not given to the lakes because of the present beavers; they were let loose here only recently.'

'For breeding?'

'Certainly. Until quite a short while ago there was a reserve here for beaver and musquash. I was employed in it.'

'What was your job—boatman?'

'I had a strange name, in Greek, something like dosmonolog. Yes, there were some good people working here. There was the botanist, Sergei Aleksandrovich Stulov. He used to call for me and say: "Come on, let's go out hunting." He hunted for various plants. We would get out a rubber boat, and off we would go through the lakes. I got to know a quantity of learned names. It seems that every plant has its learned name. These lilies now; it seems that their proper name is *nymphaea* . . ., there, I've forgotten the second word.'

'Alba.'

'That's it,' Vorontsov said delightedly, and his face lit up as though he had been reminded of some precious secret. 'Nymphaea alba! You are a botanist too, perhaps?'

‘No, I’ve just heard the name by chance.’

‘Yes, I went about a lot with Stulov. It was a happy time for me, because I felt that I was being of use to science. Then there was the zoologist, Natasha.’ Vorontsov fell into a reverie; perhaps he was lost in admiration of the *nymphaea alba*, which was slipping noiselessly past the edges of the boat.

‘What about Natasha?’

‘She would come running to me and say: “Uncle Misha, catch me a musquash! I need one very badly!” So I would snatch up a net, I knew where all the holes were. I’d put the net over the exit, frighten the animal out, and there it was in the net. They were making a study of these musquash. They would take them some distance into the forest, let them go with their snouts away from the water, and see where they would run to. Well, it’s plain, where would a water animal run to, unless he’s foolish? He turns his snout round immediately and makes off for the lake. They studied them a great deal. I had a husky dog, she was very good at nosing out their holes. Then she died. She had gone into the fields with Natasha, and hardly managed to crawl home. A snake was slithering towards Natasha, and my dog set upon it. That is how she died. She cost me five hundred roubles.’

‘Could she really scent them through the ground?’

‘Don’t foxes do the same? They smell them, block up their exit down to the water and suffocate them. Every creature has its cunning. They used to ring these musquash; first of all round the paw, then they noticed that this caused a wound from the ring, and they fixed it to their tails. There must be plenty of them in the lakes to this day, ringed specimens!’

It was apparent that Vorontsov produced this word from the depths of his memory, not without difficulty, but with some satisfaction.

‘And what of the beavers?’

‘They let loose the beavers before the war—two families altogether. Well, they were let loose, and for some time there was no sign or trace of them. After a year they found one dead one, so it was decided that they had not become established. Then I was taken away to the war, and I forgot all about the beavers. No, that is not true, I did not forget them at all; on the contrary, every free minute and before going off to sleep,

the lakes would be in front of my eyes—most usually as they looked in still weather, or at dawn. Not in rain or wind, but in still weather.'

'What did you do in the war?'

'Reconnaissance, of course, what else, if all my life I had been used to creeping up and lying quiet, so that not a sound should be heard? So I was a scout. My prey was a different one, it's true, a dangerous and crafty one, not a musquash! Yes, I was wounded and fairly badly.'

'How was that?'

'We were running to attack, and suddenly my legs felt numb. I thought that I had been hit in the leg, but I kept on running. I was puzzled. If it was my legs, how could I go on running? I reached for my weapon, and it dropped—my hand would not function. Then I realised, I'd been hit in the arm, not the leg. My glove too became heavy, blood was trickling into it. But I kept on fighting, that is, I went where all the others went. The platoon commander said: "What's the matter, Vorontsov? You're very pale." I told him I was wounded, and they wanted to put me on a stretcher, but I refused, I went on walking. We had seven kilometres to go, not more. But then I was unlucky, we came under fire, and I had to crouch for two hours in a shell-hole. I got to our objective, but then I fainted clean away.'

'And after that?'

'Then I was seven months in hospital. After hospital, I was discharged.'

'So you were severely wounded.'

'Some devil had landed three bullets in my shoulder!'

We looked curiously and with new eyes at this lean, unshaven man, who with three bullets in his shoulder had managed to fight, walk seven kilometres, and sit for two hours in a shell-hole.

'When I was discharged, I came back here at once, to my old place. I was very curious to know if the beavers had survived, or if all were dead. I got into a boat and rowed to a clump of aspens; there seemed to be no sign of them. Then—stop! A tree was cut as if by a chisel, a beaver had gnawed it! So they were alive! I rowed to Rylkovo, and there I found still more of them. I was so glad. It was then, perhaps, that I first realised that I had survived the war, that I was walking on the earth, and around me was the grass!'

‘You must know where the homes of the beavers are, do show us!’

Vorontsov turned the boat to the shore, and soon we jumped out of it and found ourselves up to the waist in lush meadow grass. The meadow flowers had faded, the prevailing colour now was the deep pink of sorrel. In places the grass was so tall and thick, that it was quite difficult to make our way through it, and it was impossible to go quickly.

Vorontsov stopped and began to examine the grass carefully. We too noticed that it looked as though someone had gone through the grass in the morning, when there was dew, and had left a narrow little path.

‘Beavers! A real beaver path!’

We walked on for some time yet through the meadow, enjoying the luxuriant expanse of green. The ground began to squelch under our feet, and water filled our footsteps. A little island rose up in the midst of the bog.

‘There is a little colony there, but I think we can’t get to it without undressing and wading up to the waist in liquid mud.’

‘Is it far to wade?’

‘It would take half-an-hour. Let’s try another place I know of.’

But here too we were thwarted by bog.

‘Beavers know where to build their homes,’ Vorontsov laughed. ‘You can’t get to them.’

We were obliged to go back to the boat.

‘Where are your friends now—the botanist, Stulov, and the zoologist Natasha?’

‘I don’t know. The reserve was given up in 1951. Everybody left.’

‘Do you miss your old work?’

‘Of course! And they were good people.’

‘Why was the reserve given up?’

‘There was need of money to keep it up. It was announced that people had become better educated, and could preserve their own possessions.’

‘And what do you think, will they preserve them?’

‘Y-es, they will,’ Vorontsov drawled out, and it was hard to know whether there was more conviction or deep mistrust in the sound.

When we returned to the house, Vorontsov treated us to white rolls and milk. The milk was sour, but we gave no hint of that, not wanting to offend the old man.

So this is what happens—we only had to turn off the road on to a forest track, and a whole, unfamiliar world was opened up before us, which it would have been so easy to miss.

The road led downhill, and soon before our eyes there was the gleam of sun on water, and we heard the splashing of little waves—we had come to the chief river of the Vladimir district, the Klyazma.

The Oka is a bigger river, certainly, than the Klyazma, but it only just touches the farthest edge of our district, forming the boundary between it and the Ryazan and Gorky districts. But the Klyazma flows right through the middle, and almost all the Vladimir rivers and streams, pour their waters into it. It is the trunk of that tree, which within the Vladimir area alone has more than five hundred branches and twigs. That is why the Klyazma is the chief Vladimir river, and sometimes people talk of 'Vladimir on the Klyazma'.

A ferry was lingering on the opposite bank, and on our side people wishing to cross were already gathering. First in the queue was a jeep, behind were two motor cyclists, then a lorry. Pedestrians were wandering along the bank.

The crossing was not a long one. Paths fanned out from the jetty on the other side, and for a few minutes we hesitated which one to take. If we went to the left, we should soon come to the very ancient town of Starodub, which is now called Klyazminsky. But we had had our fill of antiquities.

We might set off to the right, and then we should before long be sucked into the whirlpool of a big industrial town, Kovrov, from which we should not extricate ourselves for at least ten days.

The path straight ahead of us led into the forest. We did not know where it would bring us. We set off straight ahead.

We were just approaching the edge of the forest when we saw moving towards us from behind a village two kilometres or so away an immense cloud of inky blackness. Somewhat smaller clouds crowded behind, but they were packed in such close formation that it would have been folly to sit out the approaching battle within the forest. Our best hope was to attempt to

reach the village first. Taking off our shoes, we started running over the hard, dry ground. The first drops fell when we had covered half the distance to the village. But the rain did not fall upon us like a collapsing wall, as might have been expected, it gathered strength gradually and assuredly. When it was pelting down so hard that smoke lay above the ground—fine watery dust from the shattered raindrops—we just managed to take refuge within the open door of a barn. The drops were beaten into dust and smoke not only near the ground, but also in the air, as they collided with one another, so that the rectangle of the barn door was filled with a grey mist, in which the close shafts of rain glittered like fragments of glass.

The barn was empty and smelt of wood-smoke. An armful of fresh hay had been thrown down, and on this we settled ourselves.

The darkness of the rainstorm imperceptibly gave way to the dusk of evening, and a light shone out in a house opposite. Soon it became completely dark, we began to feel frozen and hungry, but the rain gave no appearance of slackening.

In three or four houses we were categorically refused a lodging for the night. Neither the kolkhoz chairman nor his deputy was in the village. Both had gone to the meadows beyond the Klyazma, where the haymaking had begun several days before.

The brigade leader, whom we fortunately discovered, treated us very hospitably, and would have put us up himself, but he had a houseful of children. He took us to a certain peasant woman, Akulina.

After a drink of hot tea and under a warm coverlet, one does not fear the noise of the rain, as one did in the barn; on the contrary, one drowns off more easily to the sound, and sleeps more soundly. Through our sleep we heard the old man, our host, come in.

‘Who have we got here?’ he asked.

‘Night-lodgers’.

‘Many?’

‘Two fellows and one woman.’

The Thirty-fourth Day

Akulina did not speak like the other women of the Vladimir region, but in a special sing-song, from which we correctly guessed that she and her old husband had moved here from other parts. The husband was a lame and handsome old man. A crafty but kindly smile lurked continuously behind his small reddish beard. I always imagined that the ancient Slavs of the northern areas round Pskov and Novgorod looked as he did. And in fact we discovered that the old couple had moved to Sannikovo from the neighbourhood of Pskov.

The rain was still pouring down as steadily as on the previous day. There was no question of proceeding on our way.

Almost opposite the windows of Akulina's house stood the village club, a one-story, long brick building. We ran over to it to pass the time.

A woman-cleaner was sweeping up yesterday's cigarette ends, scraps of paper and sunflower seed husks. The benches were moved back against the walls, and the club was simply one long, dreary room, like a box. In the far end there was a platform, on the platform a table, and on the table some dominoes were scattered about. The walls, which were stained and cracked, were hung with posters so commonplace that no one would read them, or if by some chance anyone's glance fell on them, he would not pay the slightest attention to them. For example: 'Let us take part in socialist competition! Let us finish the spring sowing campaign in the best agro-technical time!' In the first place, this poster evidently remained there in spring, summer, autumn and winter, awaiting the next spring sowing campaign. Secondly it is hard to imagine that a kolkhoz lad, having read such a slogan, would snatch up his cap and hurry away to take part in socialist competition.

The truth must be admitted: people are profoundly indifferent to such visual propaganda. New ways must be found of arresting people's attention.

We found out, incidentally, that the annual budget of the

club was restricted to the money needed for fuel and the charwoman's wages.

If you make the comparison, you see at once what importance the old world attached to its ideology. Scattered over the countryside stood white-walled temples—ideological strongholds. Even from the outside they were distinctive, dominating the surrounding country. Immense bells filled the air with music, more impressive than any pathetic symphony. The peasants came from their dark, noisome huts, and suddenly found themselves in an environment of gold and perfume, with the flickering of hundreds of candles and soft singing by the choir. It was sufficient to make their heads whirl and to stir their hearts. That is the importance which the old world attached to its ideology.

Could the club which we saw today compare in its effect with this? Nothing took place here except dances (the dancers wearing coats and felt boots) and games of dominoes. Well, a film perhaps once a week, and a very dull lecture once a month.

Our ideas are splendid and magnificent, but we do propaganda for them very badly, indeed wretchedly, especially in rural areas, where it is the most necessary.

Dinner-time was approaching, but the rain did not slacken. We had said our farewells to Akulina and were now sitting in the porch, in expectation that a vehicle might pass. But our hopes had no strong basis, because the Sannikovo lorries had driven off in the morning to fetch bricks, and still had not returned, although the journey should not have taken them more than an hour and a half. They were stranded in the mud somewhere, and their drivers were shoving sticks, brushwood, stones and straw beneath the wheels.

Already that morning Serega had predicted that this was going to be our most unrewarding day. We should sit and look at the rain, hour after hour. His prediction was being fulfilled more and more as the time passed, and our spirits drooped correspondingly. Then the proposal was made to try to retrieve the situation by going into the forest for mushrooms.

'But the rain!'

'It is only just at first that it will be awful, then we shan't notice it.'

We got considerably damp while on the way to the forest,

and we hurried in the hope that once there we should be protected. But the forest was so drenched with rain that the drips from one branch or bush were enough to soak us from head to foot.

The stealthy rustle of the drops filled the forest; but the unrelieved greyness and dampness, strange as it may seem, did not create an impression of autumn. Summer flowers were blossoming brightly there, late, ripe strawberries, and clusters of pale yellow rowan berries showed among the leaves. The foliage of the trees, succulent, heavy, dark green, seemed to have plenty of vigour still; in spite of the dullness there was a summer warmth in the air, and there were no leaves, beaten down by the rain, floating in the translucent forest puddles, which were warm to the touch of a bare foot.

We were looking only for white mushrooms, and we picked only the crowns of these. They rapidly filled the big basket which Akulina had provided us with. Cold, springy, velvety, the mushrooms spread around a delicate but powerful smell. They all looked like specially selected specimens, fresh, without worm-holes, or the marks of the sharp teeth of a squirrel.

Our triumph in the chase quickly left us. There were so many mushrooms that it became quite uninteresting. Moreover the basket was laden and became as heavy as though it were filled to the top with wet linen.

Granny Akulina was not at all surprised by our booty, but she shared our pleasure in the beauty of the mushrooms. But for some reason she was very reluctant to allow us to use her utensils and stove for cooking them. No doubt she felt a housewife's jealousy: 'A strange woman to cook mushrooms on my fire!'

Rosa had recourse to cunning.

'Granny Akulina, I don't know at all how to cook mushrooms. What must I do first, put the fat in the pan, or the mushrooms?'

Granny Akulina burst out laughing. She laughed a long while, wiping the tears from her eyes with the corner of her apron.

'Very well, I will do it all for you, and you watch and learn from an old woman.'

She went into the yard, and we heard the noise of an axe. I

ran and took the axe from her, and began to chop the firewood myself. This finally won the old woman's heart.

'White mushrooms must be cooked in sour cream, my dear, and you talk of pouring in fat!' Once again she held the corner of her apron first to one eye, then to the other. 'Then you must add to the mushrooms two raw potatoes, cut up into very small pieces, and plenty of onion.'

We all sat down to the dish of mushrooms together. The mushrooms were crisp, the forks tapped, and eyes shone; but we could not manage to eat them all. By the end Granny Akulina had become very benign and refused outright to take any money either for the meal or for anything else.

'Then we will take your photographs and send you the prints.'

The old couple posed out in the garden under a drizzling rain, with set, stupid expressions. But I spoke again of the mushrooms in fat, and immediately took the picture. I obtained a photograph of gay, lively people, just as in real life.

Just at this time a jeep skidded in front of the windows of the cottage. It took us off along a road from the village of Sannikovo, which it is impossible for anyone to imagine, who has not been along it.

It was beginning to grow dusk, the rain had turned to a drizzle. An old woman was plodding along the road with a staff higher than herself, exactly like a pilgrim of the olden days. We dragged her into the car.

'Are you going far in such weather? What's the need?'

'Of course there's need,' our new passenger said. 'I'm on my way to Mstera, to the Bogoyavlensky settlement.'

'What for, to pray to God?'

'Yes, and don't grin. When there was a great drought in the springtime, the women collected three roubles each for me: "Go and pray for rain, Praskovaya," they said. I came to Mstera, I prayed, I prayed earnestly . . .'

'Well?'

'You can see for yourselves, we had a downpour. This is the second week that the rain has been pouring down. Very well, laugh at an old woman!'

'And now where are you going?'

'Now the women have collected five roubles each for me:

“You prayed for rain, now pray for it to stop. Don’t come back to the village before you’ve stopped it.” So I’m going. It’s hard for an old woman, but I’m going.’

However the old woman did not succeed in stopping the rain by prayer. It continued to pour down till late in the autumn, so that it was impossible to walk or to drive out into the fields. Subsequently some harvesting machines were hewn out of the frozen ground. The remains of the harvest were gathered during the frost. But this was all much later. Meanwhile, laughing at our pilgrim, we drove into the big village of Mstera, famed for its handicrafts. The lights were already turned on in the houses.

The Thirty-fifth—The Thirty-eighth Day

Many books have been written about Mstera—scientific, historical and art books—from which one can glean information of various kinds. For example, that this was at one time the ancestral estate of the Princes Romodanovsky, and that at one time there lived there, if one counts the heads of families: four hundred and forty-nine icon-painters, fifty cobblers, twenty-five blacksmiths, ten carpenters, five tailors, five pedlars, one watchmaker, twenty-two butchers.

From this list one can see immediately which was the chief industry in Mstera, and because of this the expression 'Vladimir icon-daubers' became well known in Rus.

In one book it is stated that in 1858, that is, one hundred years ago, the owner of Mstera, Count Panin, declared the value of the whole property together with the meadows, gardens, orchards, pastures, churches, cemeteries, forests, rivers, icon-painters, pedlars, smiths, butchers and other tradesmen. The value given was 167,200 roubles.

From the books one can learn that after the Revolution, when icons were no longer in demand, the icon painters were left without scope for their craft. But they were such experts that they could paint an icon to match any period, so that the most shrewd connoisseurs could examine the cracked paint on a blackened board, on which the head of a saint could barely be distinguished, and not recognise it as a fake perpetrated only a week before. How should there be no employment for such skilful hands!

Some began to paint little wooden dolls and other toys, whereupon Grandfather Frost assumed the stern features of the Lord of the Sabbath. Others painted wall hangings, while others made designs for oilcloth.

It was no easy process of thought and experiment which led to the beautiful miniature work which now gladdens our eyes in museums, at exhibitions, and in the windows of gift and jewellery shops. Everybody is familiar with the little boxes,

chests and plates from Mstera. The painters of Mstera worked out their own style, which differs from that of Palekh or Fedoskino.

It so happened that we began our visit to the handicrafts of Mstera not with painting, but with another, equally beautiful art, embroidery. We were not disappointed because we remembered that some art connoisseurs had assured us that the most remarkable craft in Mstera was the embroidery, not the painting.

We went up the steps and entered the big premises of the Krupskaya Co-operative, a factory-like building. Lydia Petrovna, the shop foreman, took us round the premises. The embroiderers sat in several rows behind their frames in a long, wide room; some were quite young girls, some were middle-aged or young women, a few were quite old. Many working places were empty, and we were told that several workers had gone to the kolkhoz to help with the weeding of the maize.

We did not understand very much about the art of embroidery, but we were able to admire the nimble fingers of the embroiderers, beneath which flowers were taking shape. However the majority of the women were not engaged in fine embroidery, but in doing lazy-daisy and cross-stitch on muslin blouses.

'Here is some fine embroidery,' Lydia Petrovna said, halting by an elderly woman in spectacles, who had a severe, dignified face.

The woman was embroidering a simple design in silver on some very ordinary material. Having heard so much about the fine embroidery, we were somewhat disappointed, but we managed to conceal this and to praise her work.

'Yes, one can see at once that she is an expert, a real artist in her work!'

The woman raised her eyes and looked at us, as if she had caught us out in some unworthy action, such as telling a lie.

Lydia Petrovna was obviously embarrassed on our account, and in order to retrieve the situation said firmly:

'You are quite right, she really is an expert. If you will come with me, I will show you her work.'

She led us into a small, crowded room, called the store. Piles of finished, embroidered articles lay on the shelves. Two locked cupboards stood against one wall. Here we were joined by the

artistic director of the co-operative, Valentina Nikolaevna Noskova, a plump woman with a calm solemn face.

'You can make notes of this,' she proposed, "'that individual craftsmen have been amalgamated now into a big co-operative. Hundreds of skilled women work in big, light workshops, creating objects worthy of our people.'" Isn't that how you like to write in the newspapers?'

'Isn't it the truth?'

'No, it is not. To all appearances there has been growth and development; but in fact, year by year our co-operative is declining, losing quality. The art of the inimitable fine embroidery of Mstera is dying out and will die out entirely unless prompt measures are taken. Lydia, show them!'

Lydia Petrovna unlocked the cupboard, took out something carefully wrapped up, went over to the table, and with one wide sweep shook out—a dazzling splendour. The waving of a fairy's wand could not have been more powerful and magical. Springtime and sunlight, as in a fairytale came into the dull, little room. It was a cloth of tussore silk, covered with Vladimir embroidery; it blazed with red and orange colours, and a touch of blue. One could well believe that, however dreary the weather, however humdrum the furnishings of the room, however gloomy the mood of the company, when this cloth was spread on the table there would be an atmosphere of celebration, an uplifting of the spirit, a premonition of happiness. Such is the power of beauty!

'It is beautiful, isn't it?'

'Yes, no cloth could be more beautiful, surely?'

'Don't be too hasty. Lydia, show them!'

Lydia unlocked the second cupboard and again brought out a carefully folded package, went to the table, and again with a wide, sweeping gesture, extinguished, dimmed, eclipsed the bright colours, which we had just been enjoying.

There was no brilliance or vividness in this new cloth. The embroidery on the semi-translucent material shimmered with silver, mother-of-pearl, and simply pearls, (yes, it was most of all like pearls.) The cloth was not covered all over with embroidery; a wide strip of a very delicate design round the edge and a simple circle of flowers in the middle—that was all the embroidery on it.

If the first cloth was like the fire-bird, or really like a camp-fire, and one could apply such words to it as brilliance, sunlight, splendour, there was only one word to apply to this second cloth with the genuine Mstera embroidery—delicacy. They were contrasted like a dahlia and a lily-of-the-valley.

‘These unique objects were made by the embroideress whom you called an expert. You see, you were quite right.’

‘But what is she doing now?’

‘Turning out quilt covers.’

‘Who for?’

‘Don’t ask who for, but how many, and why? She turns them out in vast quantities, but why—we don’t know ourselves. Nor does she.’

The women were greatly agitated.

‘We will voice our complaints to you, for we really do feel ill used. Do not misunderstand us—the Soviet authorities have made good conditions for the women, they have formed a big co-operative, built light premises, improved the training of apprentices, supplied artists to create new designs; so surely they could save us from extinction, that is, not us of course, but our art!

‘It is only very rarely now that we make artistic things, though this should be our main task. We do so from time to time, if some shah’s wife comes along, or if there is an international exhibition. Our work has been displayed at sixteen international exhibitions, not to mention ones in our own country. And the situation is quite absurd! Why are exhibitions organised? To display goods, which can afterwards be bought, if anyone likes them. People like our work which they see at exhibitions, but it is no good trying to purchase our cloth, for we do not make it for sale.

‘Our misfortune and our tragedy is that we are included in the co-operative system. Our associates in this system are the producers of casks, tar, bast, and others who are engaged in very useful trades, but having no connection with art. They have no need of it, and it is wrong for us to be associated with them.

‘Year by year the plan as regards profit in roubles is increased for them and for us. You will ask us how we should fulfil this ever-increasing plan; don’t be shy, we ourselves ask this question of

the co-operative managers, and receive a short, prompt reply: "By increasing the productivity of your work."

'Now you will ask us how we are to increase productivity? It is impossible to mechanise our work; there would be no sense in it. There are many factories producing machine-made embroideries, whereas we are the sole group with workers able to do the special Mstera embroidery. It is no more possible to mechanise our work than that of the Mstera painters. Their misfortune and their system are the same as ours. It is impossible to say to a painter that he must work with his brush twice as quickly as he worked yesterday, that he should put on two coats of paint, where yesterday he put one. Similarly it is not possible to tell an embroideress to take two stitches where yesterday she took one.

'Consequently there is no question of increasing productivity. However the plan implacably demands an increase each year—fourteen millions, seventeen millions, twenty-one millions. We have to turn out as much as possible. The only way of doing it, and it is a most terrible way, is by means of simplification. Instead of one unique table-cloth—several thousand quilt covers with two or three little flowers on each. Instead of a single blouse with genuine fine embroidery, dozens of blouses adorned with lazy-daisy stitch.

'To carry out the plan it is more profitable that the material should cost as much as possible, and the work as little as possible. The material for a table-cloth costs one hundred roubles, and the work costs two thousand. That is unprofitable! Down with table-cloths! A blouse has material costing two hundred roubles, and work on it costing thirty. Good, produce blouses! The result is ludicrous. As regards material, the blouse could be worn by an artiste of the Bolshoi Theatre when receiving foreign guests in her drawing-room, but as regard embroidery—a country girl could dress up in it to go to the haymaking!

'So driven on by the plan, we turn out an avalanche of such blouses, and there is no longer any demand for them. If there were fewer, they would be better, and they would certainly be bought.

'Of course our unique cloths are not cheap, but neither are Persian carpets, yet these are bought. Say what you like, but

one hundred cloths would be bought each year in Moscow, an equal number in Leningrad, and by foreign tourists—and our craft would be preserved. Do you suppose that an artist, when starting to paint a picture, thinks of making it as cheap as possible? Or give up calling us an artistic co-operative. We are not concerned only for our table-cloths; no, we could make a blouse which would make you gasp with admiration, and a handkerchief too, but give us the chance to make such things!’

‘And what are your prospects?’

‘In the sixth five-year plan the co-operatives have to increase production by 60%. That is all very well for the producers of bricks and casks, but this includes us as well, and if our production is to be increased by 60% then instead of quilt covers we shall begin to turn out simple hemstitched handkerchiefs.

‘Even now fine embroidery, which is the purpose of this co-operative, accounts for no more than 10% of all our products. This figure is steadily diminishing.’

As we were leaving we put a last question to Valentina Nikolaevna and Lydia Petrovna:

‘You were saying that surely the Soviet authorities would come to the defence of your craft? What in your opinion should they do? What is needed?’

‘Very little. Let us be attached to the Ministry of Culture, and then everything would fall into place.’

A very long time ago in my childhood I saw for the first time a Mstera box. Or perhaps it was a Palekh one, I am not sure. At that time I was not aware of the subtle distinctions in the style of each.

No fairy-tale made such an impression on me as this box, which chanced to come into my hands. I would never have believed it, if someone had tried to assure me that it had been made quite a little distance away, a hundred kilometres or so. The box seemed to me to have appeared from some fairy-tale world beyond the sea.

In the semi-darkness of a peasant cottage it glowed like the feather of the fire-bird, which Ivanushka used to admire sometimes, taking it from his cap as he sat in the stable.

There was a smell of paste in the Mstera workshop. Pieces of ordinary cardboard, such as is used for book-binding, were pasted together here, put into a press, and then put to heat in

linseed oil mixed with kerosene. We were told that the kerosene is needed as a conductor, so that the board should be completely permeated. After this the board is put in an oven, where it is dried for about seven days.

On our way from one building to another we saw a box filled with variegated bits of glass, such as are sold in cheap brooches, rings and earrings, and which are very reminiscent of fruit drops. We asked what these were for, and were told that they were ground down and made into sandpaper. 'We cannot use any sandpaper, we have to make our own.'

A minute later we saw the board, after being heated in the oil, being scraped with sandpaper. Here in the carpentry shop it was already taking on its future shape—a cigarette-case, brooch, box, casket.

We were shown a casket of unusual shape, which was finished up to that point in the process, and we were told that its present value was a few roubles, but that soon it would cost twenty thousand. Such it is to be in the hands of an artist!

The black substance looking like earth is composed of clay, chalk, soot and oil, as we were told. This they smear on to the sides of the article, making an even layer and smoothing it with little trowels. Three layers of lacquer are put on the box, then three coats of red paint on the inner sides, then four coats of colourless lacquer.

The sides which are to be painted are rubbed with pumice-stone and are made matt. In such a form the article comes into the hands of the artist. You would never say now that the article is made from ordinary cardboard; it shines splendidly under the electric light like black, polished wood.

The painter Igor Kuzmich Balakin, one of the younger generation of painters, initiated us into the various styles.

'Palekh has taken the black colour of the box as its base,' he said. 'Their black colour is active, with them it is a colour,' and he showed us boxes painted in the Palekh style, where the sky was black. 'If the Palekh painter needs a black horse, he does not paint it with colours, but uses the background of the box, which is already there. Thus the black colour of the article is an active part of the Palekh painting.'

'With us it is neutral. Look, here we have a coloured sky, blue with white clouds. That is the main difference. But besides

that, the Mstera style is more ornamental and fanciful, the Palekh is more realistic and simpler. Look once again at a Mstera box; every square centimetre is painted, it is crowded with painting.'

We were now walking through the painting workshop, where the lacquered articles come with matt sides, ready for the paint. Young men and girls were sitting, bent over tables. In front of them they had a variety of colours poured into ladles: gold, red, yellow, green, blue and white; each colour had its own ladle. The needle-like tips of very fine brushes were dipped in one or another ladle, and left a very delicate design on the black background. We admired a girl who without any preliminary outline was applying quite a complex ornamental design to a round powder compact—a design made of silver lines no thicker than a hair.

'It is difficult to make a mistake, if you are painting perhaps your three hundredth compact. This is not creative work, but mass production. We are turning out more in quantity now, but less in value.'

At another table we saw a youth (we saw the same scene several times later on), who had a number of articles set out in a row in front of him, and who was putting the same stroke on each of them in turn. Such a method enabled him to increase the productivity of his work. This was the equivalent of the quilt covers of the Krupskaya Co-operative, which here took the form of powder compacts.

'Where are your old men, veterans, members of the Artists' Union, who have received awards for their art?'

'They work at home. It is they who mainly do the creative work, but they do it only rarely. All the rest is copying and mass production.'

'How is the uninformed purchaser in a shop at the counter to distinguish your creative articles from the mass produced ones?'

'He will have no occasion to do so. Our creative works do not come up for sale. We make them for museums and exhibitions, sometimes for gifts.'

Our conversation turned on the subject of Mstera painting.

'Our young painters are at odds with the old ones. The young demand realism, while the old maintain the conventions of

icon-painting. In the middle of a kolkhoz rye field, an old painter inevitably manages to introduce a traditional Novgorod hill; this is a constant subject in icon-painting. A Novgorod hill next to some frontier guards; can you imagine such a thing?

'As you know, during the war the Americans were our allies. Almost all our products went to them beyond the ocean, and they liked the old, icon-style painting, so all our collective developed this style.

'Then the war came to an end. We continued our work, but for the home market. Unfortunately there was little demand for the old style. In order to save the situation, we had to have recourse to the merest hack-work. Mstera artists undertook the reproduction of paintings. So there appeared all those 'Little Bears', 'Pines in a Rye-Field', even down to 'A Letter from the Front'. This was the other extreme. We were on the point of losing our special style.

'Now we have recovered it to some degree, but it is not quite the same. A deposit of realism has remained on the painters' brushes, and there is nothing to be done about it. Incidentally, what is your opinion? Ought we to aim at realism?'

'Well, what exactly do you mean by . . .'

The question was put to us suddenly and point blank, and it was difficult to give a straight answer. The reader may regard the question as a strange one, and our hesitation and confusion may seem even more strange, instead of the short and sharp reply: all art should aim at realism! But in this case it was not so simple.

If a teller of folk tales begins to employ realistic art forms instead of the traditional, fairy-tale conventions, she will cease to be a teller of folk tales and become an ordinary writer. And in general it is very dubious whether it is sensible to celebrate the modern world by methods appropriate to folk tales and legends. The content dictates the form. In so far as the unity of form and content is the main condition of art, the situation as regards the Mstera painters is not at all simple. Their painting style is conventional. Look at all those elongated figures, the short arms, and the legs, one shorter than the other. When the subject is an imaginary one, there is nothing wrong in this, but as soon as he begins to depict tractor-drivers or frontier guards, the effect is ridiculous. But they cannot give

up their style and take up ordinary, easel painting, because it is impossible for the Mstera painters seriously to rival painters such as Plastov, Yuon, Saryan and Nemensky.

That is why even Igor Balakin himself, who put this tricky question to us, and who, better than any of the other Mstera painters perhaps, is capable of realistic painting, has the greatest success with fairy-tale subjects. The conventional style of Mstera miniature painting demands a fairy-tale subject, or if it touches on real life, it demands an epic or highly romantic theme.

'Igor Kuzmich,' we said, 'you know all the requirements of the co-operative; if you were given one wish, as in a fairy-tale, and it would be carried out, what would you ask for?'

'I would ask that our co-operative should be put under the Ministry of Culture.'

At this moment his secretary called the artist aside to tell him that Morozov had come.

'Here's a bit of luck for you! Our patriarch, the initiator and guardian of our style, has come himself. Recently his eyes have become dim and his hands tremble. We keep him on, we give him boxes to paint, but to tell you in secret, they are not any good. We say to him: "That's good, Ivan Nikolaevich, an old hand has not lost its cunning", but we can see that he is worn out completely, and it is time for him to retire. It will be the same today. He will show his work and look hopefully at us. Perhaps we ought to tell him the truth, but we keep putting it off.'

An old man with close-cropped grey hair and a grey shirt the same colour as his hair was waiting in Igor Balakin's room, sitting by the table. Near him there was some article wrapped in a cloth.

'Well, show us what treat you have for us,' Igor Kuzmich said, perhaps a little too heartily. 'Unwrap your firebird.'

The old artist unwrapped the cloth. His hands shook.

'Yes, let's take it nearer to the light. Yes, there's still some powder in the powder-flask!'

Morozov did not move to the light, but remained standing near the table with the cloth in his hands. His shoulders suddenly shook, he turned and went from the room without a word.

'He's understood, evidently. Well, it had to come some day. We must pay him a visit today. The old man will be feeling sad.'

On the box there was a picture of a subject taken from 'Dubrovsky'. The faces were distorted, one figure even was painted on top of another. This was the end.

An hour or two later we entered the old painter's cottage, an ordinary timber cottage with a kitchen and a living room with fig-plants and geraniums, a treadle sewing-machine, and a high bed covered with a bright rug. His working-table stood in a corner. Before our arrival Ivan Nikolaevich had been tidying up. He had collected together his brushes, phials and bottles, so that they should be out of sight and not re-open the wound in his heart.

'Will you really not paint any more, just for yourself as a recreation?' we asked Morozov.

'No, I shall not take up a brush again. I've worked long enough. After all, I'm seventy-three. I've worked for thirty years, looking at one small spot. However small the article is, while you are working you don't see the whole of it, you concentrate on the one spot. So it has been for thirty years.'

It appeared that of all the Mstera painters Morozov had worked on especially small, delicate articles. For example, on a small box, he had painted the whole of the 'Tale of the Hosts of Igor' in many scenes; it is not surprising that his eyes had failed.

'Where is your work now?'

'I don't know, scattered throughout the world. Some must be in museums, some abroad. One piece was kept in the Crafts Institute, and this was taken by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, when he went abroad. He gave it as a present, I suppose. In a word, I don't know where my work has gone. It is enough for me that my boxes exist, that people look at them and think about Russia.'

On our way back we visited another skilled artist, Ivan Alekseevich Fomichev. The combination of artist and old bachelor in one man had brought about a truly bohemian disorder in the room. He was engaged in painting a casket, the very one about which they had told us that it cost a few roubles,

but would soon be valued at twenty thousand. Heaped up around him were piles of dusty books, chiefly art books, and strings of dried fish hung from the ceiling.

‘Did you catch them yourself?’

‘Yes, we are all fishermen here; it is a recreation and refreshes our eyes. But during the past year the fishing has no longer helped me; I look at the float and see my casket. I am being hurried with this casket, it is needed urgently somewhere. Consequently I am only painting the top in detail, I shall have to do the sides in a hurry.’

Ivan Alekseevich was much heartier than his friend Morozov, and in the chaos of his bachelor room we felt more at ease than in the immaculately tidied room of the Mstera vereran.

We were sharing a room at the hotel with a man of lean appearance, who had been sent to Mstera on business. Full of impressions of the embroidery co-operative and the painters, we communicated to him our anger at the treatment of these workers. He lay on his bed, his hands behind his head, and listened to us in silence. However, it was obvious that our words did not please him.

‘You should bear in mind that I am an inspector of that producers’ co-operative organisation, which you are attacking. I have come to check on how the plan is being carried out.’

‘Excellent. Can you tell us then in what way the embroiderers and the painters are to meet your constantly rising demands for productivity?’

‘By raising the productivity of their labour,’ the inspector replied, without a moment’s hesitation.

‘And how in your opinion does an artist increase his productivity? It cannot be mechanised. Must he work with his brush twice as fast?’

‘That is not our concern. There must be reserves within the enterprise, the better organisation of working conditions and so forth.’

Our conversation continued in a fairly vehement manner, until finally the inspector leaped up from his bed, and barefoot, shouted at us:

‘What do you understand about producers’ co-operatives? You are rather too young to give us instructions.’

‘These co-operatives will be taken away from you and handed

over to the Ministry of Culture, then you'll sing another tune!'

'We shall see about that. It's been said often enough.'

However, realising that the inspector had much more regard for bare figures expressed in roubles than for painting and fine embroidery, we lost interest in him. Moreover, the rucksack was packed and it was time to go to the jetty.

The Thirty-ninth Day

This day began in the evening. We had found out that passenger steamers sailed along the Klyazma, and we had the idea of travelling like that as far as Vyazniky. There was one inconvenient fact: the steamer arrived at the Mstera jetty at three o'clock in the morning. We did not want to break into our sleep, walk three kilometres to the jetty and hang about for the steamer in the chilly dawn. So we decided to go on board, not when the steamer was going towards Vyazniky, but on the way back. Let the steamer take us to the terminus, halt there and then turn back. We should be asleep, and in the morning we should come just the same to Vyazniky.

To take such a trip we had to be at the jetty by seven o'clock in the evening.

The steamer had not yet arrived, but numerous passengers were strolling along the bank, admiring the view of the river. Peaceful and full after the rain, it had taken on all the colours of the early evening sky. It seemed that it was the fiery river which made such brightness around, and not the sun, which was just above the horizon.

At a little distance the swift current came up against the sharp-edged tip of an island, shaggy with bushy osiers. Sometimes, if you looked closely, the island seemed to be swimming towards the stream, leaving behind the two diverging folds in the water.

Near the jetty some carpenters were chopping pine logs. There was no other sound but that of their axes. The smell of resin, too, alone permeated the air.

At a little distance from the bank a man in a tarpaulin rain-coat was fishing from a small boat. Every now and again he cast his light line. The float was carried by the current for a few seconds, then came another throw. Almost every second time he cast he got a bite, and then at the end of the line, which to us at a distance was invisible, a small fish gleamed as a tiny speck of light.

An old paddle steamer, the *Robespierre*, approached, panting; at one time, no doubt, the merchants of Vyazniky and Mstera had voyaged on her.

There was a splashing and gurgling from beneath, and the banks, unwinding, quietly swam to meet us. It was Thursday, which for the people of Mstera is equal to a Saturday, for Friday is a holiday for them, and we were struck by the number of fishermen along the banks of the Klyazma.

In one spot, in a sandy clearing among thick bushes, a family was preparing for a night's camping. The father and mother were erecting a tent, and the children were either helping or hindering.

Swallows had their nests in the sandy slope of the left bank. Over a long distance the bank was mottled with their black holes. The birds were flying busily over the water, and disappearing with a flash in the earth. Haymaking was in progress right to the edge of the bank with the swallows' nests. From the upper deck the meadows could be surveyed as on the palm of one's hand. Over there stood a big hut, next to it a table set with empty milk bottles. Close by a reaper was whetting his scythe. It was several seconds before the sound reached us, clear and resilient, like the song of a nightingale. A hobbled horse was straying around. In the distance two reapers had finished the cutting of a strip. One of them wiped his scythe on a tuft of grass, put it on his shoulder and set off towards the hut. All this was set against a vivid green, lit up by the last red rays of the dying day.

I was woken up by a big jolt and looked through the porthole. Outside it was night, and the air was cold. The black steamer stood in black water. On the black shore planks and logs lay piled up in stacks, feebly outlined against the dark sky. The whole bank both to right and left seemed like one big store. Black people were wandering about. To this day I do not know where the steamer had put in, or what was the name of this place, which left a rather gloomy impression on me.

Sometimes there began a stamping of feet, a running over the deck, loud bangs, creaking and clatter; the *Robespierre* was taking on some load. Sometimes she sounded her siren, but we woke and slept again.

We were greeted by a dull morning. A quiet, warm rain

soon turned to a drizzle. On the right we glimpsed a small wooden church, like the one we had seen near Yuriev. Big villages ran down to the Klyazma on both sides. The forest trees were still.

Everything was reflected in the water—the trees, the church, the houses in the villages. But the Klyazma was flowing, consequently the reflections in the water were blurred, as if you were looking at objects through a thin piece of ice.

Quite close in front, on the right bank, the little town of Vyazniky appeared, with its white houses, a big concrete building, and green orchards. We were already quite near, but the river made a bend and turned away to the left, and the town slipped away again into the distance.

At last the *Robespierre* put in at the jetty. Mingled with the crowd of passengers, we began the climb up a narrow little road, between wooden houses. Alongside the usual wooden footpath there was another one built up on piles, high and narrow, as a precaution against the spring flooding of the Klyazma.

The lively clamour of a market attracted the passers-by, as the smell of honey attracts bees. This was a splendid market, from which it was easy to determine what were the riches of the surrounding countryside. The main produce was mushrooms—whole rows of stalls were taken up by all kinds and varieties of mushrooms. Dried mushrooms from the previous year were being sold in huge ropes, at prices which to the Moscow housewife would have seemed fabulously cheap. But naturally there were larger quantities of fresh mushrooms, still with pine needles sticking to them. They lay in heaps and piles, in buckets and baskets, and simply in carts. It was an abundance of mushrooms, a surge of mushrooms, a flood of mushrooms.

Other stalls were piled up with berries. Translucent currants, amber-yellow and red, with dark dots inside, the clusters reminding one of diminished bunches of grapes; black-currants as large as cherries; garden raspberries, big enough to fit on one's finger instead of a thimble; wild raspberries, small and crumpled, but of unusual aroma and sweetness; gooseberries, transparent and rosy, with reddish hairs; bilberries with their blue-tinged skins. There were also fresh-salted cucumbers, piles of onions, a heap of painted wooden spoons, clay whistles, mats and baskets made from fragrant willow.

The only thing lacking—which should have been in greater abundance than all the rest—was the famous Vladimir cherry.

It was brought here to Vyazniky some four hundred years ago, allegedly from Greece. From generation to generation the fruit-growers of Vyazniky have grown wise with experience and have developed its cultivation.

In December they used to break off branches of the cherry in the frosty orchard and put them in bottles of water, sealing the necks with wax. In a month, when the frost was making patterns on the windows, the white flowers of May were blossoming in all the house of Vyazniky. This was not done for the pleasure of it, but as a test; the future harvest was foretold by the blossom.

A watchtower used to be built in the orchard, and strings were stretched from it to wooden boards, on which small bells were fixed. Anyone sitting in the watchtower could strike at once the bells on all the boards in various parts of the orchard. One can imagine what a clatter and din there was in Vyazniky during the cherry season. A quantity of rattles added to the noise. 'However', writes the author who describes all this, 'in the course of many years the birds grew accustomed to the noise and took no notice. But it is dreary and dull in Vyazniky when there is no cherry harvest.'

It seemed that we had come in a poor harvest year, for we heard no rattles, nor did we see the famous cherry in the market. It is said also that many orchards have been killed by frost, and that many too were cut down in the post-war years, when a tax was levied on every tree bearing stone fruit.

The centre of Vyazniky is no different from other towns of a similar size; a hotel, a café next to it, a few cinemas, a bus station containing dusty country buses and lorries with benches for the passengers.

There is a fine view from a high hill on the edge of the town. The hill is washed by orchards as if by the tide of the sea, and it is difficult to tear one's eyes away from the horizon and the distances beyond the Klyazma. All the windings of the river, its secondary channels, cast like bright horse-shoes into the green of the meadows, the little lakes, the villages, the vivid green patches of bogs—all this lies stretched out before one. And the Yaropolchshky forest beckons and calls with its vastness,

and in the centre of it lies the mysterious lake Kshchara.

That is where we decided to go. The question was discussed at an evening conference in the hotel.

The time for our travels was running out, although we had managed to cover only a half of what we had planned. At Vyazniky we had come out on the asphalt highway, which we had left forty days ago. Our dream was to cross it and plunge into the country which lay on the other side. But the three days which remained at our disposal did not permit this.

In summing up our journey, we expressed the opinion that we had shared the burdens of the tour harmoniously, that we had learned much of interest, and that the following summer or the year after that it would be a good idea to walk through the country which we had missed this time, the members of the company being the same as before.

It is good when life leaves room for dreams. In life there is no stagnation, no completed task, no conclusion. When one stage has been covered, another one opens out before us.

We decided nevertheless to visit the Yaropolchshky forest before leaving the Vladimir countryside. Thereupon ended the historic conference in the hotel 'Svet'.

The Fortieth Day

'The forest is a social organism, in which the trees enter into close interaction with each other, and affect the ground which they occupy and the atmosphere'—this is an extract from a book on forestry, which was read to us as a valediction by one of the workers at the Vyazniki forestry station.

I cannot claim that we repeated these wise words as we proceeded towards the heart of the Yaropolchshky forest. Yet evidently the forest must have affected us as well as the ground and the atmosphere, for we walked hushed, entranced, shaken, awestruck, overwhelmed.

We walked, tiny figures, past the trunks of copper-red giants, which lifted their green crowns somewhere far above us. The trunks, like ourselves, were immersed in shade, but the tops saw the sun, the far horizon, the immensity of the earth.

There was no undergrowth here. The ground was made up of little hillocks—perhaps at one time there had been sand dunes here—and was covered with close, whitish lichen, and thus seemed to be carved out of silver. The lichen crunched slightly under our feet on the hillocks, and yielded gently in the damp hollows. White lichens and red pines—there was nothing superfluous in this forest.

Just when, according to our calculations, the heart of the forest, lake Kshchara, should have been no more than five or six kilometres away, our attention was caught by a mark cut on a pine, which we had not noticed before. It was like a feathered arrow no less than one and a half metres in length, so that the feathering took up the whole width of the tree.

We examined it closely and saw that at the lower end of the arrow, where one expects to see the tip, a little iron container was fastened to the tree, filled with a white substance like melted lard. In some of these containers white pellets of lard were swimming in rain water which had collected there. Memory then suggested to us the word 'turpentine'.

The next three or four trees were marked in the same way.

Looking into the depth of the forest we saw that all the pines now had the mark of an immense arrow, and we could see a long way, so that we could observe hundreds of trees at a glance.

A short time later we noticed a girl going from tree to tree with a bucket, lingering not more than half a minute at each. When we went nearer, we saw that she was clearing the white lard from the little containers with a blunt-tipped knife and putting it into a tub.

When this became heavy, the girl went to a small hut, scarcely noticeable even from close at hand, and emptied the contents of the tub into a barrel.

We wanted to find out more details about her work from this collector of turpentine, but she would not talk to us, being alarmed perhaps at meeting strange people in the forest, all the more because by this time Serega's beard really was capable of inspiring mistrust and even fear. In answer to all our questions the girl sent us to the head of her section, a technician living quite near by.

We soon saw some buildings through the trees, and without difficulty found our technician, a short man with a small moustache, called Peter Ivanovich Sirotin. First of all he took us into his room, where his young and beautiful wife immediately placed on the table a dish of boiled mushrooms and three tumblers.

Peter Ivanovich told us what he could about the collection of turpentine.

'When a pine receives any kind of wound, the tree in self-defence pours sap into it, which rapidly thickens in the air, from translucent turns white, and stops up the wound. In the same way a wound is sealed by coagulated blood. So the wounded tree exudes turpentine which soon coagulates. Consequently, in order to obtain a quantity of turpentine we have to wound the tree again and again. A man goes up to a pine, slightly smooths the rough bark, and with a quick, skilful movement cuts a deep but narrow channel one and a half metres in length along the trunk. The turpentine will flow along this channel. He cuts two short channels at a sharp angle to it, and underneath he fixes a little iron container to receive the turpentine. After three days he comes to the tree again and makes a new wound below the old one. When this has been

done three times, that is, after nine days, a woman goes round the trees to collect up the turpentine. Each worker has up to five thousand trees in his charge.

'Turpentine begins to be extracted from a tree from ten to fifteen years before it is to be cut down. When a tree has two years left to live, the usual method of cutting is reinforced by chemical means. The fresh wound is smeared with acid. The tree as it were howls with pain, for it begins a frenzied distillation of turpentine with its last remaining strength. By this chemical action the quantity of turpentine collected is increased five or six times. The weakened tree is then hewn down and carted away.'

We went into the forest and Peter Ivanovich began to show us the various processes.

'What a pleasant profession,' we observed. 'To walk through a pine forest from tree to tree —blissful!'

'Well, I'm not so sure. Of course, it is not unpleasant to walk through a pine forest, but if one has to make five thousand incisions, it is not so easy. The workers go out at three o'clock in the morning, before it is hot. It is easier to work then, the flow of turpentine is better and does not coagulate so quickly.'

Peter Ivanovich readily offered to accompany us to lake Kshchara, and we set off straight through the forest, without any path, following signs which he alone knew.

'Fine old warriors!' Serega said admiringly once again, looking at the pines.

'Yes, they really are warriors,' Peter Ivanovich answered seriously. 'When the trees were ten years old, there were not less than twenty thousand to every hectare, but when they are a hundred years old there remain only a hundred of them. All the rest have perished in the struggle for existence. It means that the ones you see before you have won the fight for life, they are the strongest and the most enduring, that is, real warriors.'

Lake Kshchara appeared before us unexpectedly, as though a part of the forest had sunk beneath the ground, and in its place was water. In shape the lake is like a flower with several petals, and these petal-like bays give the lake its charm and interest. The scene is completed by two tree-covered islands.

Peter Ivanovich said that the depth of the lake was as much

as seventy-five metres, and that there were a number of such deep lakes in the neighbourhood. There is Lake Chistenkoye, which at first glance is like a big pond, fifty paces long and thirty paces wide, but the depth is twenty-five metres. In this lake there is a tiny island, the size of a small boat, which nevertheless has some bushes on it, and even some wild strawberries. It is a floating island, and the local inhabitants keep it tethered to the bank, and if they wish, go for an outing on it.

But Kshchara is not like the little Chistenkoye; it is a big, extensive lake, the shores of which would be a most suitable site for a sanatorium or rest-home. It is only a pity that the pines on one bank have been felled ruthlessly, and thus an unsightly gap has been made. Surely it might have been possible to leave at least an untouched strip of forest for one hundred metres next to the water. There is no lack of trees in the Yaropolchshky forest!

A solitary house stands on the shore of the lake, where a forester lives with his son, an eighteen-year old youth, with eyes now grey, now blue, when the sun falls on them—just as it is with the lake Kshchara.

This lad smiled condescendingly when we asked him for fishing-rods. It was his way to smile condescendingly at everything.

‘Where shall we go? You probably know all the best places for fish?’

Gena—that was the lad’s name—again smiled condescendingly.

‘The whole lake and all its fish are yours, they’re not scared anywhere. Throw in a line and take all you want.’

However, we walked for some distance along the shore, choosing a more secluded spot, where water-lilies grew near the bank.

It is absurd to hope for a big catch when fishing from the bank in a large lake. As though the fish had little room and must inevitably loiter close to the land! In a large lake one must fish from a boat. Nevertheless we kept getting bites continuously, and landed some ruff, carp and some small perch. Once I even chanced on a bream, flat, with a faint gleam of gold, which surprisingly offered no resistance.

I do not like to fish with other people’s rods, for some reason

I feel awkward with them; but in spite of this it is very pleasant to spend a few hours beside the water in the quiet early evening.

Stringing our catch on to long twigs, we returned proudly to the lodge. Surely Gena would not now smile at us so condescendingly. But it was only the bream which held his attention for more than a second. Without a word he got into a small boat hollowed out of a log, and rowed rapidly out to the middle of the lake. From afar we could see him busy with his hands, and we guessed that he was every now and again letting down a line into the water and pulling it up again. Having worked in this manner for thirty minutes, he returned. The bottom of the boat was completely covered with fish. We understood then what kind of a lake the Kshchara was.

The dawn had scarcely begun to glimmer when we had already woken up and stepped out of doors. Everything was grey—the misty forest, the lake, the sky. In one spot, in a gap between the pines, the dawn showed as a small, red piece of paper fastened to the sky. The day promised to be rainy and windy. We quickly bathed in the lake, drank a jar of milk supplied by the forester's wife, took up our rucksacks, and set off into the forest.

I do not know whether there were more trees or mushrooms. When we stopped on the path and revolved slowly, we could count fifteen to twenty superb white mushrooms just on that piece of ground within our view. We even made it into a game—who could count the most mushrooms without moving from the spot.

But we became bored with mushrooms and began to look out for berries, which were still more plentiful. We sat down on the soft forest floor, and with concentration ate up the whole area within reach. We ate the berries in handfuls, and our hands, as also our lips, teeth and cheeks, quickly turned black. What an abundance of good things go to waste in this forest alone! Dozens of tons of mushrooms, bilberries and cranberries could be gathered here. The children and women from the neighbouring villages could hardly make much impression on them, even if they were to drag huge baskets crammed with bilberries back from the forest!

As for us, we should have been sorry to go away from all this plenty, had we not eaten enough to last us for the whole of the year ahead.

Towards evening the forest began to thin out, there were deciduous trees instead of the pines, and soon there opened up before us the water meadows of the Klyazma and the outline of Vyazniki on the farther steep bank facing us.

We shouted 'Hurrah', because the appearance of Vyazniki on the horizon meant the end of the wanderings, which have been described in this book, not very vividly perhaps, but conscientiously.

Of course, during a journey, when every hour one is enticed onwards by the prospect of a distant region as yet untravelled, it is difficult to investigate in depth, even though it is enticing also to do this. One has to make a choice: either to journey, that is, to go on farther, to the next village; or to remain in one village, and study it exhaustively, in detail.

My description of Suzdal, for example, has taken up only a few pages, whereas of course a whole book could be written about the town. More than that, if one were to investigate in depth, any one family in kolkhoz or town, any one individual even, could serve as a subject for a story or even a whole novel.

But even from this rapid glance at the Vladimir countryside, where the new and developing way of life is mingled so strangely with the old, it is impossible not to be aware of the profound changes which have taken place in the hearts of the Russian people, thanks to which each one says of himself that he is not simply a Russian, but a Soviet Russian.

Try to compel him now to be a hired labourer, if there could anywhere be found an employer wishing to hire labourers, which in itself is a fantastic thought. What a hope! Will a kolkhoznik, who is familiar with free and equal work, join the ranks of hired labourers? The times are not right for that, nor is our people, nor our country!

But why talk of labourers! Compel him to leave the kolkhoz, cut him off a strip of land and tell him to work it for himself. Your kolkhoznik will tell you: 'Why should I burrow alone on a tiny strip of land, like a beetle? We have grown unaccustomed to that in our collective.'

If sometimes he abuses and criticises the chairman of the village council, or the kolkhoz or some 'higher organisation' because of some deficiencies, it is important to understand the

situation. I recall a remarkable scene in some film; the time was the early period after the Revolution, and people were standing in a queue for bread under an autumn drizzle. The workers were swearing and cursing the 'authorities' because they had to stand in queues and because the shop was slow in opening. A member of the bourgeoisie, who chanced to be standing in the queue, added his voice to the workers' grumbles: 'The Bolsheviks have made a fine mess of things, there's nothing to eat.' Then events took a strange turn. The whole queue turned upon him: 'What, don't the Bolsheviks suit you? Are the Soviet authorities not to your liking?' 'But you yourselves were saying just now . . .' 'Oh, we may talk, but we ourselves are the authorities now, we are grumbling at ourselves.'

At the end of our travels we felt glad also that we had been in villages which were developing, that the people in every village without exception were working harmoniously and willingly to build all those solid co-operative buildings, and that they were already seeing the positive results of the policies adopted by the Party, and were looking to the future with confidence and hope.

The attention which the Party has paid to the countryside has warmed and given new life to my native Vladimir, as well as to the villages near Moscow, in the Ukraine and in Siberia.

It was sad to leave my native countryside, which during the forty days of travel I had grown to love still more.

In olden days the Slavs, when they were departing from their homeland, plucked up a herb from the river bank and kept a fragment of its root with them throughout their travels.

I believe that they did not so much invest this with magic properties as see in it a fragment of their native earth, personifying their homeland and their invincible love for it. And what will help better and more surely in any difficult enterprise than this love?

Before us too there lie other roads to travel, new journeys, perhaps not easy ones, which have no end.

If this is so, and if it is not simply a herb, but love of our homeland, then shall we not repeat after our ancient forefather, preparing himself for the difficulty of unknown ways:

'Herb of power! Overpower wicked people: may they not

think evil against us, may they not plan wickedness, drive away the sorcerer and the slanderer.

‘Herb of power! Overcome for me high mountains, low valleys, blue lakes, steep banks, dark forests . . . I will hide you, herb of power, close to my eager heart throughout all my journey and all my ways . . .’

AT LIFE'S BEGINNING

Samuel Marshak

Translated from the Russian
by Katherine Hunter Blair

Introduction by Moira Budberg

This charming autobiography of a distinguished poet and translator is a wonderful evocation of a childhood in Russia at the turn of the century. The 20th Century has so altered the pattern of life in Russia that the world described here in loving detail seems far removed from our knowledge and experience.

Samuel's father, though a master chemist, is forced, through financial necessity, to move frequently, searching for work. The boy learns early in life to hold his own with the street toughs encountered in new cities. He is horrified when witnessing the cheating of the other boys on the entrance exams to the local gymnasium, and his hopes are shattered when he is denied admittance despite his outstanding performance on the oral examination.

His literary career is launched when he edits a handwritten, single-copy literary journal. He writes the poetry and *Lanya*, a deformed intellectual, provides prose and satire. When the family moves to a suburb of St. Petersburg, Samuel reads Tolstoy and Gorky. During a holiday in the city, he meets Stasov, a critic and art collector. Stasov has him transferred to the gymnasium in St. Petersburg, and it is in this city that he makes his first stumbling attempts to meet the working people. Ill health makes it necessary for him to go south to recuperate, and an important literary friendship begins when Stasov introduces him to his idol, Gorky who invites Samuel to live with him in Yalta.

Without imposing the experience of age on the events of youth, one of Russia's most popular children's authors vividly re-creates a long-gone era with his affection for life and remarkably keen observation of people.

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